Review of: "On the Meaning of Psychological Concepts: Is There Still a Need for Psychological Concepts in the Empirical Sciences?"

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Psychological Terms Have their Origins in Intersubjectivity – Not Introspection

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Suoganen address a deeply important issue that cuts to the core of psychology as a discipline: where do psychological concepts get their meaning? How are we to understand and study psychological experience scientifically when the experiences of others is not something that is directly observable?

Suoganen has noted a delicious contradiction in the history of this issue: Psycohlogists have long argued that introspection is not a reliable method for gaining knowledge about psychological experience. If this is so, then the scientific study of experience must be something that relies upon observations of “external behavior”. To study experience scientifically, the psychologist must observe “external behavior” and then make inferences about private or subjective states that lie behind that behavior. But how is this possible? How would it be possible for psychological scientists to make inferences about what lies behind the overt behavior of others unless they already had some sense of what *could* lie behind that behavior? How would a scientific observer know that another person was experiencing this or that state – or experiencing anything at all? The answer must be that the psychologist must already have knowledge about the types of experiences that lie behind the behavior of others. And how do they have this? Well, by introspecting on their own experience.

But how can both of these statements be true? How is it possible to simultaneously claim that *introspection is unreliable* and that *we can successfully infer the types of inner states that lie behind the overt behavior of others*? If introspection is unreliable, then we have no reliable basis to infer what lies behind another’s behavior! Indeed, if introspection is unreliable, we have no reliable way to trust what an experiencing person says about his or her own experience! The only way out of this conundrum is to admit that introspection must at least be someone reliable as a way of gaining access to experience. If it is not, then we simply have not way to gain access either to the experience of others or to that of ourselves!

This creates quite a conceptual conundrum. It seems to expose the hard-nosed psychologist who seems objectivity as a kind of poser. Psychologists claim to be basing their truth statements on objective observations of observable behavior –

but they must, in fact, be using conceptions of their own experience to understand the meaning of the "overt behavior" that they are studying! This is a deep problem for any version of psychological science that claims to buttress truth statements in objective observations.

Why Introspection Is Impossible – At Least How We Ordinarily Think of It

Suoganen raises a deeply important issue. However, his conclusion – that introspection must be at least partly reliable – cannot solve the problem that he has so keenly raised. This is because introspection – at least as we ordinarily understand it – does not exist. I am not saying that we do not experience – quite the opposite. Not only do we experience, but a psychology that does not view the concepts of experience and meaning as foundational to its subject matter is no psychology at all. We not only experience, but we experience psychological states directly. The problem of psychology is not in our having of experiences – it is our understanding of how we come to understand those experiences. It is a problem of how we make our experiences intelligible not only to each other, but also to ourselves. It is a problem of how psychological terms – joy, confusion, thinking, intention, imaging, attention or road rage – gain their meaning.

The Concept of Introspection

We ordinarily think that psychological terms gain their meaning from the process of introspection. Introspection is the process of "looking inward" at our subjective or private experience. As a form of observing, introspection (looking inward) is the opposite of extrospection (looking outward). When we look outward, we look at a public world that we all can see. When we look inward, however, we look at a private world – a subjective world that only we can see.

Through introspection, we look within us, identify our subjective experiences, and then use words to communicate those experiences to others. From this viewpoint, psychological terms get their meaning from our private capacity to introspect and refer to our subjective experiences.

Why Introspection Fails (as an Explanatory Concept)

In his argument against the possibility of private language, Wittgenstein shows that this everyday conception of introspection and experience cannot possibly explain how psychological terms gain their meaning.

Wittgenstein's argument is difficult, subtle – and devasting for our everyday understanding of how we come to understand our inner worlds. He argues that if it were true that psychological experience were truly private – that is, if other people can never have access to our experiences – then it would be impossible for us to learn the shared meaning of everyday psychological terms. Wittgenstein argues that if psychological experiences were truly privates states that only individual experiencers could ever access, it would be

Assume it were true that psychological experiences are truly private states that only individual experiencers could access. Such a condition would be as if everyone had a private box into which only he or she could ever see. Imagine that there was an object – call it a "beetle" – in each person's private box. Under such conditions, it would be impossible for anyone to know what was in anyone else's box. Without the capacity to see what was in each other's boxes, we never be able to

agree upon what words to use to refer to what was in anyone's box. Not only would I not be able to know what was in your box, *you* would not be able to know what was in*your* own box!

You would *see* what was in your box, but without the capacity to share what was in your box, neither you nor anyone else would know what to call it. This is because words are not private events. We are able to use words to communicate because words represent *shared* meanings. Without the capacity to refer to*shared public criteria for identifying some object or event,* communities of people could never agree upon what words to use to refer to different objects or events. If experiences were indeed private events, it would be just like having a beetle in a box into which no one except the owner could ever look. No one would be able to use words to refer to, describe, or most importantly – verify between people -- what was in the box. If experiences were truly private, they could not be made intelligible either to others or to ourselves.

Yet, we do refer to our inner experiences. How is that possible? Again, Wittgenstein holds that without some public criteria, we could never be able to verify that we are using words in the same way. To the extent that we are able to use words to refer to our experiences, there must be some sort of public criteria that communities use to verify the proper use of inner state words. Wittgenstein holds that there are indeed public criteria that we use to verify the use of experience words. These criteria are what we call the bodily expressions of psycholgoical states: writhing or screaming in pain; looking toward objects in interest; the facial, vocal and behavioral expression of anger, and so forth.

The meaning of words that refer to our inner experience do not have their origins in our capacity to looking within and point out our experiences to others. Indeed, if experiences were private, that would simply be impossible. Instead, the shared meaning of inner state words comes from our capacity to refer to public expressions of psychological states.

- Spontaneous experience is expressed directly through facial, vocal and other bodily activies
- People within a linguistic community use public patterns of expressive activity as the basis for shared categories of experience
- Patterns of facial, vocal and bodily activity are not so much expressions of inner experience as much as they are manifestations of those experiences; that is, there is not first inner experience and then also public expression that just happens to be related to experience: what we call the expressions of spontaneous experience are the public aspects of experience. In this way, psychological experiences shine through their public expressions

If this is true, then it is an error to regard psychological experiences are inherently or necessarily private states. Spontaneous experiences are revealed directly in their public expressions. To be sure, we experience our "inner states" states directly. But our capacity to make them intelligible to both self and other is dependent upon our capacity to use words whose shared meanings arise from public expression – not a capacity to look into ourselves and identify private experience that only the experiencer herself can observe.

What We Call Introspection Isn't

It follows that what we call introspection is not really introspection at all. What we call introspection is the capacity to use words to mediate acts of reflection on our phenomenal experiences. When we "introspect", we don't so much look into a

world of private experience; instead, we use words that gain their shared meanings in public expressions to mediate the process of reflecting upon our experience.

We do not link words to experience by labeling our experiences and then using those words to make experience public. Instead, we learn to identify our own experiences by the proper uses and shared meanings of words. We experience pain directly. However, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, the process by which we learn to use the word pain to refer to our experience occurs as follows:

1. We (e.g., infants, children, adults) experience pain directly
2. We exhibit public manifestations of pain – screaming or writhing in pain; certain facial expressions
3. People in the community around us use the these expressions as public criteria to create shared public categories
4. When a child learns to use words like “pain” or “hurt”, they apply to themselves words whose meanings have their basis in public expressions
5. When a child learns to use the term “pain”, she learns that the word refers to the experience that she has when she (and others) evinces particular patterns of public behavior
6. When a child “introspects” upon his or her experience and says, “that was an experience of pain”, she is engaging not in an act of private observation, but is instead using words to mediate either public (in social discourse) or personal (in thought) reflection.

Thus, experiences are not inherently private events. It is true, of course, that people can hide their experiences. But when they do this, they do not hide any inner private state; they hide or inhibit the public manifestation of psychological experiences. The fact that people can hide experience is a testament that spontaneously produced experiences are not inherently or necessarily hidden.

Suoganen’s Refutation of Wittgenstein’s Argument

In his defense of the role of introspection in psychology, Suoganen seeks to refute Wittgenstein’s argument against the possibility of private language. He writes:

Wittgenstein's Private Language argument is not plausible. This argument concludes that a language in principle unintelligible to anyone but its originating user is impossible: “The reason for this is that such a so-called language would, necessarily, be unintelligible to its supposed originator too, for he would be unable to establish meanings for its putative signs.” (Candlish & Wrisley, 2019, p. 1; Kripke, 1982; Mulhall, 2007; Racine & Slaney, 2013; Stern, 1995; Wittgenstein, 2009, §§244–271) *However, we are able to establish meanings for its putative signs. Language does not refute the fact that I have knowledge of internal processes and phenomena, such as memory and introspection* (emphasis added).

Suoganen’s refutation of Wittgenstein’s private argument lies in the following reasoning. First, he correctly notes that Wittgenstein rejected the possibility of a private language because “such a so-called language would, necessarily, be unintelligible to its supposed originator too, for he would be unable to establish meanings for its putative signs.” Suoganen suggests however, that the fact that we are able to establish meanings for our psychological experiences shows that Wittgenstein must be wrong. For Suogenen, ff we can establish language for psychological experience, then introspection

must be the mean by which this occurs.

Psychology as an Intersubjective Science

Wittgenstein, however, was clearly aware that we use words to refer to our psychological states. For him, this showed not that introspection or private language was possible, but instead that the assumption on which the concept of introspection is based – namely the idea that experiences are inherently private states – is erroneous. In making this argument, Wittgenstein refutes the traditional (and still used) Cartesian distinction between a private mental interior and a public physical exterior.

It is this Cartesian distinction that Wittgenstein set out to destroy. Despite its putative rejection of mind-body dualism, psychology continues to build upon Cartesian dualism. It is the very distinction between a private mental interior and a public physical exterior that creates the problem of how we come to create psychological language. It is because we continue to be dualists that we have difficulty coming to a satisfactory psychological science of experience.

Textbooks in introductory psychology are replete with contradictions that make it impossible to come to terms with psychological language. Preserving the Cartesian distinction, psychology is defined as the "study of mind and behavior" or "the science of mental processes and behavior". This is its first contradiction. Textbooks then proceed to speak of psychology as a science that seeks objectivity. In so doing, the science of psychology is called upon to anchor its truth statements in "objective observation" – which means "objective" descriptions of "external" behavior. At this point, psychology faces an intractable problem: How do I study psychological experience from the standpoint of external behavior? How do I develop "objective" indicators of "subjective" states. As long as we preserve a hard distinction between the subjective and the objective, the inner and the outer, the mind and the body, the public and the private, we will not be able to solve this problem.

A psychology that remains committed to the duality between objectivity and subjectivity will forever find itself vacillating between so-called "objective observation" and "private introspection" – without being able to bring the two into coordination. The path toward resolving this thorny dichotomy is to see that what we call "objectivity" and "subjectivity" are opposing poles of an antinomy. What we call "objectivity" and "subjectivity" are only possible because of the already existing human capacity for *intersubjectivity* – the capacity to share, coordinate and mutually incorporate experience between people. Both "subjectivity" and "objectivity" rely upon a prior "intersubjectivity". What we call "subjectivity" is nothing more than the capacity to show that what is applies to me applies for everyone; what we call "subjectivity" is nothing more than using intersubjectively shared understandings to make sense out of personal experience.

The path to intelligible psychology is through the formation of an intersubjective human science.