

# Psychology as storytelling

Psychology



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## Sam Vaknin's Psychology, Philosophy, Economics and Foreign Affairs Web Sites

Storytelling has been with us since the days of campfire and besieging wild animals. It served a number of important functions: amelioration of fears, communication of vital information (regarding survival tactics and the characteristics of animals, for instance), the satisfaction of a sense of order (justice), the development of the ability to hypothesize, predict and introduce theories and so on.

We are all endowed with a sense of wonder. The world around us is inexplicable, baffling in its diversity and myriad forms. We experience an urge to organize it, to "explain the wonder away", to order it in order to know what to expect next (predict). These are the essentials of survival. But while we have been successful at imposing our mind's structures on the outside world - we have been much less successful when we tried to cope with our internal universe.

The relationship between the structure and functioning of our (ephemeral) mind, the structure and modes of operation of our (physical) brain and the structure and conduct of the outside world have been the matter of heated debate for millennia. Broadly speaking, there were (and still are) two ways of treating it:

There were those who, for all practical purposes, identified the origin (brain) with its product (mind). Some of them postulated the existence of a lattice of preconceived, born categorical knowledge about the universe - the vessels

into which we pour our experience and which mold it. Others have regarded the mind as a black box. While it was possible in principle to know its input and output, it was impossible, again in principle, to understand its internal functioning and management of information. Pavlov coined the word "conditioning", Watson adopted it and invented "behaviorism", Skinner came up with "reinforcement". But all ignored the psychophysical question: what IS the mind and HOW is it linked to the brain?

The other camp was more "scientific" and "positivist". It speculated that the mind (whether a physical entity, an epiphenomenon, a non-physical principle of organization, or the result of introspection) - had a structure and a limited set of functions. They argued that a "user's manual" could be composed, replete with engineering and maintenance instructions. The most prominent of these "psychodynamists" was, of course, Freud. Though his disciples (Adler, Horney, the object-relations lot) diverged wildly from his initial theories - they all shared his belief in the need to "scientifically" and objectify psychology. Freud - a medical doctor by profession (Neurologist) and Bleuler before him - came with a theory regarding the structure of the mind and its mechanics: (suppressed) energies and (reactive) forces. Flow charts were provided together with a method of analysis, a mathematical physics of the mind.

But this was a mirage. An essential part was missing: the ability to test the hypotheses, which derived from these "theories". They were all very convincing, though, and, surprisingly, had great explanatory power. But -

non-verifiable and non-falsifiable as they were - they could not be deemed to possess the redeeming features of a scientific theory.

Psychological theories of the mind are metaphors of the mind. They are fables and myths, narratives, stories, hypotheses, conjunctures. They play (exceedingly) important roles in the psychotherapeutic setting - but not in the laboratory. Their form is artistic, not rigorous, not testable, less structured than theories in the natural sciences. The language used is polyvalent, rich, effusive, and fuzzy - in short, metaphorical. They are suffused with value judgements, preferences, fears, post facto and ad hoc constructions. None of this has methodological, systematic, analytic and predictive merits.

Still, the theories in psychology are powerful instruments, admirable constructs of the mind. As such, they are bound to satisfy some needs. Their very existence proves it.

The attainment of peace of mind is a need, which was neglected by Maslow in his famous rendition. People will sacrifice material wealth and welfare, will forgo temptations, will ignore opportunities, and will put their lives in danger - just to reach this bliss of wholeness and completeness. There is, in other words, a preference of inner equilibrium over homeostasis. It is the fulfillment of this overriding need that psychological theories set out to cater to. In this, they