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# From 'Psychology *in* Literature' to 'Psychology *is* Literature'

## An Exploration of Boundaries and Relationships

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ABSTRACT. Three categories, varying from lowest to highest levels of abstraction, of possible relationships between psychology and literature are critically examined. The first category represents the lowest level of abstraction and involves 'psychology in literature': literature as a source of psychological data; literature as a source of insights for psychology. The second involves literature as an independent variable; literature as a dependent variable; literature as understood through psychology. The third, at the highest level of abstraction, involves psychology as nomothetic and literature as idiographic; psychology as culture-free and literature as culture-bound; psychology as concerned with actual worlds and literature with possible worlds; and, finally, 'psychology *is* literature'. Each option is viable at a particular level of abstraction, although 'psychology is literature' is particularly provocative, and also nurturing of cultural research.

KEY WORDS: culture, literature, narratives, story-telling

> *It is impossible for the human intellect to grasp the idea of absolute continuity of motion. Laws of motion of any kind only become comprehensible to man when he can examine arbitrary selected units of that motion. But at the same time it is this arbitrary division of continuous motion into discontinuous units which gives rise to a large proportion of human error. . . . Only by assuming an infinitesimally small unit for observation—a differential of history (that is, the common tendencies of men)—and arriving at the art of integration (finding the sum of infinitesimals) can we hope to discover laws of history.* (Tolstoy, 1869/1957, pp. 974–975)

The point of departure for our exploration is the observation that both psychology and literature selectively examine particular parts of the whole of human experience. More specifically, both psychology and literature adopt as one of their goals the better understanding of overt behavior and the mental life of individuals, and how these are related. Given this important commonality, it is surprising there has been so little attention to the

relationship between the two disciplines (see Potter, Stringer, & Wetherell, 1984, for a rare exception and a review of the scant literature on this topic). A major reason for this neglect is that during its relatively brief history, traditional psychology has been preoccupied with the challenge to construct itself as a science (Danzinger, 1990), interpreting 'science' with strongly positivist leanings (Harré, 2002). Values guiding traditional psychology have led to attempts to strengthen links with biology, biochemistry and the 'real sciences', rather than with literature and the arts.

The 'discursive turn' and the rigorous ongoing focus on narratives in human and social sciences (Bruner, 1986; Harré, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988; Spence, 1982) affords new opportunities to expand the debate about the relationship between psychology and literature. The benefits of expanding this debate are explicitly suggested by the types of relationships that are critically reviewed in the following discussion, such as literature being a source of psychological 'data' and 'theory', psychology acting as a guide to the better understanding of literature, and psychology and literature complementing one another by one of them focusing on general trends and the other on particular cases. Also, if the literature of different cultures is a source of psychological data, then it could serve as an invaluable asset to help psychologists explore universals in behavior across cultures, as well as across historical eras. Thus, there are very good reasons to give closer critical attention to possible relationships between psychology and literature.

In this critical assessment of a variety of possible relationships between psychology and literature, my approach is 'asymmetrical' in that I am privileging psychology. Thus, this exploration of relationships between psychology and literature is undertaken from the vantage point of psychology, and intended to help fill a gap identified from this particular disciplinary perspective. In the past few decades the social aspects of scientific research have received some attention (e.g. Latour & Woolgar, 1986), as have commonalities in creativity and insight in science and literature (e.g. Digby & Brier, 1985; Shea & Spadafora, 1990). Particular attention has been given to the role of rhetoric in science (see Finocchiaro, 1990; Gross, 1990; Ormiston & Sassower, 1989; Pera, 1994; Pera & Shea, 1991), as well as to the use of scientific rhetoric in argumentation, such as in debates about the environment (see Chapter 3 in Harré, Brockmeier, & Mühlhäusler, 1999). However, more critical attention needs to be given specifically to the relationship between the science of psychology and literature.

I critically assess three categories of possible relationships. These categories are not assumed to be exhaustive, but they represent the major types of possible relationships. The categories differ in levels of abstraction. At the lowest level of abstraction, Category A is comprised of two relatively 'functional' types of relationships that fit under the title of 'psychology in literature': (A.1) literature as a source of psychological data; (A.2) literature as a source of insight for psychologists. Category B is comprised of

relationships between psychology and literature that focus primarily on the nature and role of literature: (B.1) literature as an independent variable in psychological research; (B.2) literature as a dependent variable in psychological research; (B.3) literature as a domain of human behavior to be better understood through psychology.

At the highest level of abstraction, category C, are relationships that concern the broad characteristics of psychology and literature: (C.1) depictions of psychology as nomothetic (focused on population trends in order to arrive at general relationships and possibly universal laws) and literature as idiographic (focused on particular cases and concerned to understand each individual as distinct and in some ways unique); (C.2) psychology as culture-free and literature as culture-bound; (C.3) psychology as dealing with actual worlds, contrasted with literature as dealing with possible worlds; (C.4) finally, the possibility is explored that psychology is literature. The following, then, is a critical review of a number of possible relationships between psychology and literature, culminating in a focus on relationships that seem most plausible at the highest level of abstraction.

## Category A

### A.1: Literature as a Source of Psychological Data

Literature in its various forms, but particularly novels, plays and poetry, may be considered as a source of psychological data. First, the process of writing could itself be studied, as a means toward the better understanding of creativity (see, e.g., Doyle, 1998). This kind of scholarship could provide a welcome focus on divergent thinking, and an alternative to the traditional 'IQ testing' approach to cognitive abilities. A second route, which is more directly relevant to the present discussion, is to treat major literary works as a series of vast mineral deposits, which psychologists can mine in order to excavate data from different historical eras.

On the surface, at least, this seems to be an unproblematic assertion. Literature is written about human experiences, and often depicts the private and public lives of individuals and groups. The human experiences explored in literature, and the aspects of lives described, are often very similar to those that are of central concern for psychologists.

Moreover, literature 'reports' on human experiences in different historical eras and societies. Through these 'reports', comparisons could be made within time across societies, and across time within societies. Such strategies would presumably lead to the identification of etic, universal or near universal, and emic, local, characteristics of human behavior. For example,

Spackman and Parrott (2001) compared descriptions of emotional experiences 'reported' in classic US novels of the Romantic, Victorian and Modern periods. This across-time, within-society exploration revealed fascinating shifts in emotional experiences, and highlighted the importance of historical context in the construction of personal experience. In another creative study, Parrott (2000) has suggested that modern psychological theories could be tested by exploring behavior as depicted in the literature of other eras. Another approach is to explore the psychology of other eras through 'data' provided in literature, an example being Hartog's (1987) exploration of the self in time in 19th-century England as depicted particularly in the novels of Dickens.

There is a need for caution, however, as regards the consideration of literature as a source of 'data'. What exactly do these 'data' indicate? Literature is created by authors, and the depictions of behavior found in literature may be interpreted in many different ways, some interpretations contradicting others. The following are just a few possibilities among many, asserting that authors attempt to describe experiences that:

(a) most readers would recognize and share;
(b) reflect an entertaining range of possibilities for readers, with clear indications as to which possibilities are closer to the ideal and worthy of emulation;
(c) most readers would find more interesting;
(d) are closest to a fantasy most readers desire to enter through literature.

The above interpretations all may be valid to some degree, and others we have not listed may also have some validity, depending in part on the kind of literature we consider, and the readership for the literature in question. The issue of readership is particularly important. For example, consider interpretation (a) above, 'authors attempt to describe experiences that most readers would recognize and share'. This assumption underlies the position taken by Harré (1979), 'I presume that in a play, the psychology of the characters which did not reflect that of the audience in a considerable measure would be unacceptable' (p. 92). We must add a further complexity, because there are fundamental power and status differences within 'the audience', so that some individuals and groups influence what is 'unacceptable' for others. For example, those who have greatest influence through the media, the education system and other means of propagating messages can help to shape literary and artistic tastes, including what is 'unacceptable'.

Perhaps it is not 'data' as such that psychologists will find most valuable in literature, but new and deeper theoretical insights about human thought and action. After all, it is a common assertion that readers arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of 'characters' from reading literary works than

from reading works by psychologists. This issue is further explored in the next section.

## A.2: Literature as a Source of Insights for Psychological Science

Psychologists could look to literature as a source of insights that could be incorporated in their research, as hypotheses, for example. There are three reasons in particular why valuable insights useful to psychologists could be found in great literature. The first reason is that a large body of great literature has explored *long-term processes* and change in persons and relationships over time, whereas most psychological research has focused on outcomes (rather than processes), tested in brief laboratory experiments, typically lasting an hour or so. Literary works could help psychologists gain a better understanding of long-term psychological *processes* and change, and in this way fill an important gap in psychological knowledge (Moghaddam, 2002). This is in terms not only of individual personality development over the life-span, but also of the changing social relationships and collective and institutional processes that fundamentally shape individual development. An example of this is found in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, in which the inefficiencies and corruption of the legal system gradually transform social relationships and individual personalities.[1]

Second, there is a 'quality of mind' argument: great literature entails observations and ideas regarding human behavior from some of the most brilliant minds in human history. Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Jane Austen, and perhaps a dozen others, possess a quality of mind that is rarely matched. Their insights on individual and collective human life should not be disregarded.

A third argument is that these brilliant individuals have interests that in some ways are similar to those of modern psychologists; they raise questions that are similar and fundamental to understanding human behavior. For example, in *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy (1877/1966) asks, 'Is there a line to be drawn between psychological and physiological phenomena in man? And if so, where?' (p. 28), and much later psychologists have wondered, 'Does the brain produce the mind? Is so, how and why? Or does the mind control the brain? If so, how can a nonphysical entity control a physical substance?' (Kalat, 1999, p. 7).

Such questions have led great writers to insights that often came to be experimentally studied much later by psychologists. For example, in *Adam Bede*, George Eliot (1859/1961) used several characters, particularly Arthur, to explore her insight that 'Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds. . . . There is a terrible coercion in our deeds which may first turn the honest man into a deceiver, and then reconcile him to the change' (p. 307). Much later, the question of how 'our deeds determine us' came to be studied by psychologists interested in the impact of behavior

on attitudes, and particularly by supporters of self-perception theory in their competition with supporters of cognitive dissonance theory (see Moghaddam, 1998, Ch. 4). Although the number of such examples is too extensive to review here, at least passing reference must be made to Marcel Proust and the monumental insights he provided on memory in the seven novels referred to under the title *Remembrance of Things Past*. Proust explored memory not as an isolated activity performed by an isolated individual, but as a re-constructive process very much linked to a person's identity development and arising through social interactions. In the language of 21st-century research, Proust explored memory as if context is everything (see Moghaddam, 2002, Ch. 10). Given the psychological insights provided by Proust and other creative writers, it is not surprising that a number of researchers have explored and appropriated insights from literature in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the construction of the self and identity (e.g. Benson, 2001; Besemeres, 2002).

In the domain of research methods, as well, great literature provides valuable insights, some of which were independently taken up by psychologists much later. For example, consider the laboratory experiment. Introductory psychology texts typically recount that Wundt pioneered the experimental study of human behavior. But there are much earlier examples of 'experimentation' on human behavior in literature. In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, for example, the young prince sets out to test the hypothesis that his father, the former king, was murdered by his uncle, the present king, with the complicity of his mother, who is now married to his uncle. In order to test this hypothesis, Hamlet sets up an experiment. This experiment involves a re-enactment of the murder, and close observation in order to identify the effect of this re-enactment on two groups of participants: first, his uncle and his mother; second, other courtiers watching the play. If the king and queen are guilty, so Hamlet postulates, then they will be particularly affected by the re-enactment of the murder. Their reactions will give them away. In order to ensure that experimental procedures move ahead smoothly, Hamlet uses professional actors as confederates to re-enact the murder scene. He also asks a friend, Horatio, to observe the king and queen's reactions, thus acting as a check on the reliability of his own observations.

There is little doubt that interesting insights can be found in literature, including insights about methods, but these tend to be scattered around in different parts of unrelated works. Such insights are typically not part of a broad psychological theory or system. Although psychologists can find inspiration and occasional guidance through great insights in literature, this is a rather limited basis for the relationship between psychology and literature, because the emphasis here is only on a one-way rather than a two-way relationship. As discussed in the next section, literature can influence the thoughts and actions of readers (and indirectly, that of others), just as psychological knowledge can influence the contents of literature.

## Category B

### B.1: Literature as an Independent Variable in Psychological Research

In traditional cross-cultural research (e.g. Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002), culture is often used as an independent variable, meaning that the influence of culture on behavior is examined. Following this tradition, literature, an important component of culture, can also be incorporated as an independent variable in research. The assumption that literature affects personality development and behavior generally is pervasive in society, and particularly in the education system. On a broad scale, censorship is intended to curb the negative effect of literary works such as *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, which was successfully defended against obscenity charges in court, and in educational systems it is not uncommon for there to arise heated debates about 'unsuitable' books that would have a bad effect on the young. McClelland (1961) has undertaken perhaps the most extensive psychological study that incorporates literature as an independent variable. However, if we expand the definition of literature to include discourse in television programs and other aspects of the modern media, then the number of studies has risen sharply.

How should we conceptualize the 'effect' of literature on behavior? The traditional approach has been through the idea of an independent variable (cause = literature) that determines changes in an dependent variable (effect = behavior). This deterministic cause–effect model assumes, among other things, that the 'target' of literature is isolated individuals. A more accurate, and necessarily more complex, conceptualization is to consider the processes through which literature enters the discourse of people in interaction. Through collaborative and changing interpretations of literature, people in each era and cultural context incorporate aspects of literary scripts into their private and public discourse; as reflected in social representations, for example (Moscovici & Marková, 1998). Thus, there is a change in both their discourse and their 'take' on the literature being incorporated. The meaning that the same literature acquires, and the role it plays in everyday lives, changes over time within cultures, and within time across cultures. Thus, a depiction of literature as a 'causal' independent variable is too limited, particularly because it neglects the two-way relationship between psychology and literature. Just as literature can influence psychology, psychology can influence literature, as discussed in the next section.

### B.2: Literature as a Dependent Variable in Psychological Research

What 'affects' the nature of literature? If we accept as valid the causal assumption inherent in this question, then among the possible 'causes' of

literature are the culture in which literature arises and the author who creates the work of literature. We have already alluded to the idea that literature reflects culture, and can be used as a route to understanding culture, but now we are confronted by an assertion about a far more specific and direct cause–effect relationship. Is it valid to assert that, for example, the plot, the cast of characters, the personalities and other central features of *Sense and Sensibility* were causally determined by the culture of early 19th-century England, or by the personality and way of life of Jane Austen?

No doubt the characteristics of both culture and author are in some ways reflected in literary works. The restricted role of women and inheritance laws in 19th-century England, as well as the personal preferences of Austen, no doubt did influence aspects of *Sense and Sensibility*, such as how the two sisters Elinor and Marianne are portrayed. But, once again, the assumption of causal determinism involved in independent variable/dependent variable relations is far too simplistic, in part because it is not capable of taking into consideration the kind of intentional, creative and original planning and writing Austen achieved in her novels, or the complexity and authenticity of the characters and their relationships.

A counter-argument has to be considered, one based on a 'naïve empiricist' position. It could be claimed that: if we know everything there is to know about the context and the personality of the author (these being the 'causes'), then we could predict the work of literature that would result (the 'effect'). According to this view, at present we are unable to predict the effect because we lack sufficient information about the cause. But far from being an 'objective causal account', this perspective requires us to have faith in a 'promised day' when we will (supposedly) have all the information we need to make causal predictions. Of course, it could also be claimed that traditional psychology does not adhere to such 'naïve empiricism', but critics have contended otherwise (see, e.g., discussions in Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Sloan, 2000).

In practice, relatively little research attention has been given to the idea of literature as an independent or a dependent variable. Far greater attention has been given to the interpretation of literature through psychological theory, the next topic discussed.

### B.3: Literature as Interpreted Through Psychology

Without doubt the most prevalent type of relationship found between psychology and literature is the use of psychology as a means for interpreting literature. As is evident from the contents of *Psychology and Literature*, a journal published since 1951, it is psychodynamic psychology that is most commonly used in the analysis of literature. Freud's influence on writers has been extensive, but perhaps he has been even more influential among literary critics.

Freud's particular interpretation of the unconscious, and his psychosexual model of development more broadly, seem especially well suited to analysis intended to uncover the 'real' motives behind literary text. But there are a number of different ways of approaching the question of 'real' motives. For example, should we assume that Shakespeare was conscious of the power and nature of the Oedipus complex when he wrote Hamlet, or should our assumption be that unconscious forces moved Shakespeare to write a play with these particular contents? Or, to take another example, should we assume that Lewis Carroll wrote about the child Alice while fully aware of his inability to form adequate romantic relationships with adult females? Or should we assume that he was moved by unconscious forces to compensate for his inadequacy by writing about young Alice? Critics have almost invariably taken the position that authors are unaware of such forces shaping their works.

A major shortcoming of the tradition of using Freudian or any other psychological ideas to 'better understand' literature is that researchers are assumed to achieve a privileged position through psychology, one that allows them to understand why authors 'really' write what they do. But this 'understanding' is achieved in the absence of direct empirical evidence. After all, researchers do not get to interview or directly observe the behavior of the writers whose works they are attempting to understand. For example, Freud (1913/1974) and Jones (1945) did not get to interview Shakespeare for their examinations of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, respectively. The only 'evidence' available is what is to be found in the plays, and so we are forced to assume that Shakespeare has projected onto these plays conscious or unconscious motives and other psychological characteristics that can be accurately identified by us.

Freud (1928/1961) does go beyond the literary work to also examine the personality of the author in his discussion of Dostoevsky (the same is true for his treatment of several artists, notably Leonardo de Vinci), but this seldom expands the 'evidence' considered. For example, in discussing Dostoevsky, one of Freud's claims is:

> It is scarcely owing to chance that three of the masterpieces of the literature of all time—the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles, Shakespear's *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—should all deal with the same subject, parricide. In all three, moreover, the motive of the dead, sexual rivalry for a woman, is laid bare. (p.188)

But this example reflects a general trend: the primary source of 'evidence' remains the contents of the works of art, and we are left with many questions about the kinds of issues that could be tackled using such 'evidence'.

Thus far, in categories 'A' and 'B', the focus has been on relationships between psychology and literature that are at a lower level of abstraction, concerning 'data', 'independent and dependent variables', and the like. In

the next major section, the focus shifts to types of relationships at the highest level of abstraction, culminating in the proposition that 'psychology is literature'.


## Category C

### C.1: Nomothetic and Idiographic

Psychology and literature might be viewed as complementary, in the sense that traditional psychology relies heavily on a nomothetic approach, and literature relies on an idiographic approach (for a discussion of the modern usage of these terms in historical context, see Lamiell, 1998; Windelband, 1894/1998). This view presents psychology as focused on general trends in behavior, giving special attention to group aggregates and generalizations about populations. The avowed goal of this enterprise is to discover the causes, as well as universal laws, of behavior. Thus, in traditional psychology, emphasis is almost exclusively placed on deriving data through studies of groups of people, sampled from a target population. For example, personality research has used quantitative assessment techniques with large samples of participants, and attempted to identify universal traits. Currently, the so-called 'Big Five' traits are assumed to be universal, at least by traditional Western psychologists (see McCrae & Costa, 1997).

In contrast, literature is traditionally depicted as taking more of a case study approach, where the special and sometimes unique features of an individual or group or context are highlighted. In literature, personality is explored by focusing on specific case studies, as happens in numerous novels that bear the name of the main character in the story (e.g. *Adam Bede*, *David Copperfield*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Tom Jones*, *The Great Gatsby*, etc.). This apparent focus on unique individuals is further highlighted by authors often writing part or all of a work of literature from the personal viewpoint of one or several characters. For example, the opening sentence of Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* makes it clear that this is a narrative from the main character's perspective, 'Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show' (Dickens, 1849–1850/1950, p. 1). Another example is provided by what is perhaps the most 'psychological' among major novels, *Crime and Punishment*, in which much of the story is told with special attention to the private experiences of the main character, Raskolnikov. The reader is moved along by Raskolnikov's changing feelings, until his final confession of his crime. This literary style intensifies the feeling the reader has of being 'in the company of' unique characters in the novel.

Upon closer inspection, however, we find that what may appear to be a complementary relationship based on apparently nomothetic and idiographic

paths proves to be far more complex. First, with respect to the claim that psychology is nomothetic, there are severe limitations to the ability of psychology to make valid generalizations about the behavior of humankind. The groups that are the focus of psychological research are not representative samples from the wider world population. Indeed, the participants in psychological research tend to be drawn from a very narrow population, mostly undergraduate students in the United States and other Western societies (Moghaddam, 1998, Ch. 2). Thus, the 'generalizations' arrived at in psychology have a very narrow population base. Furthermore, it could be argued that if psychological processes occur in individuals, aggregate studies cannot logically reveal them. Personal propensities cannot be deduced from statistical distributions.

On the other hand, there is some validity to the argument that literature is as nomothetic as it is idiographic, because the personalities, groups and contexts depicted are actually representative of general trends as assumed by the authors. For example, Raskolnikov is like all or most other humans, in the important sense that he is first and foremost a social being, unable to bear the chasm that his crime has created between himself and his fellow humans. Through confession, he re-asserts his link with the rest of humanity, even though it comes at the cost of his being punished for the crime of murder. Similarly, from this viewpoint, *Hamlet* is representative of young men generally; he is a kind of inferred abstraction, based on multiple and brilliant observations of youth interacting with others. Likewise, Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* represents all individuals who are abused in childhood, then become abusers themselves as adults.

Indeed, the reason why we continue to pay such close attention to *Hamlet*, *Crime and Punishment* and other great literary works, the reason why such works are timeless, is exactly because they unearth important universal characteristics of human behavior. Thus, it is too simplistic to depict such works as exclusively or even primarily concerned with local, unique cases. Once we view characters in literature as 'representative' and indicative of general trends, we are forced to set aside the idea that literature is idiographic. Another widely held generalization, psychology as 'culture-free' and literature as 'culture-bound', is re-evaluated and found wanting in the next section.

## C.2: Psychology as Culture-Free and Literature as Culture-Bound

Received wisdom depicts psychology as culture-free and literature as culture-bound. This traditional view stems from the idea that psychology is a science, engaged in the discovery of facts through the use of an objective methodology. The research methods adopted by psychologists avowedly allow for objective hypothesis testing. As such, psychology is assumed to be free from cultural biases. Literature, on the other hand, is assumed to be

strongly shaped by culture. Indeed, the study of literature is considered an essential avenue to understanding a culture. Thus, for example, by reading *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, among others, one can come to a fuller understanding of United States culture.

Let us accept as valid the assumption that literature reflects culture; what of the claim that psychology is culture-free? Critical attacks on this argument have intensified since the late 1960s (Billig, 1976; Gergen, 1973; Harré & Secord, 1972; Sampson, 1977), so that by the early 21st century, critical psychology has become a thriving sub-field (see, e.g., Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997). Among the main arguments raised by critical psychologists is that the very questions addressed by traditional psychology are selected through the influence of cultural biases. For example, traditional psychology is criticized for reductionism, a bias seen to be associated with the ideology of self-help and individual responsibility dominant in Western capitalist societies, and particularly the US. Other lines of attack on the assumption that psychology is culture-free have been developed by cultural psychologists (Cole, 1996; Shweder, 1990), and varieties of social constructionists (Danziger, 1997; Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1993).

Indeed, a review of the critical literature might lead to the conclusion that those who want to better understand United States culture should study traditional psychology with an awareness of the cultural biases inherent in this field, such as 'self-contained individualism' (Moghaddam, 1998). Thus, although literature clearly reflects cultural biases, critics would argue that psychology also shares this characteristic, albeit less explicitly.

Literature is often associated with imaginary worlds and the creation of ideals, whereas psychology seems to be strictly tied to examining the world in actuality. This distinction is particularly associated with images of psychology as a science, dealing with 'hard facts'. As we see in the next section, this depiction has a number of shortcomings.

### C.3: Psychology as Dealing with Actual Worlds and Literature with Possible Worlds

Another possible distinction could be that psychology deals with actual worlds, human behavior 'as it is', and literature deals with possible or imagined worlds, human behavior 'as it might be' or 'as if'. This distinction between the worlds of the 'as is' and the 'as if' seems to reflect a fundamental difference between an enterprise intended to capture how things actually happen, and one intended to conjure up how things can be imagined to happen. Thus, for example, Ebbinghaus's (1850–1909) pioneering studies on learning and memory might be considered as reflective of the 'as is', whereas the 'learning' that Katharine experiences in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is 'as if' and in the realm of possible worlds. Similarly, Sherif's

(1966) classic study of intergroup relations involving boys in a summer camp might be considered to tell us about behavior 'as is', whereas Golding's descriptions, in *Lord of the Flies*, of group and intergroup dynamics involving boys stranded on an island might be considered as informing us about possible behaviors and the 'as if'.

Closer scrutiny of the distinction between psychology and literature on the basis of an 'as is' and 'as if' distinction leads to valuable insights, first about when this distinction seems to work well but, second, about when this distinction does not work well, and what this implies for psychology as a science. To begin, consider more closely Ebbinghaus's demonstration of memory limitations. Ebbinghaus tested participants, mainly himself, in isolation, in order to measure the number of bits of apparently meaningless information a person can remember over different time periods. The focus of Ebbinghaus was on the isolated mind, and its capacity to remember information (apparently) devoid of meaning. He asked: how many bits of information can the isolated mind take in, retain and recall? He attempted to exclude all meaning by using nonsense syllables, consisting of two consonants with a vowel in between that do not make up a word (e.g. KUZ). Ebbinghaus was a pioneer in psychological research that attempts to get at the 'as is'.

But this pioneering research and the tradition that it established neglects an important kind of memory: memory 'in context' and in meaning systems. There is increasing evidence to support the idea that memory should also be considered as part of collective, social processes (see, e.g., the special issue of the journal *Culture & Psychology*, *8*(1), on 'Narrative and cultural memory'). The Ebbinghaus tradition, of testing how isolated individuals remember, fits more with a paper-and-pencil examination tradition than with memory in everyday life, where we remember through interactions with others and in the context of meaning systems. Even when we are dealing with apparently meaningless bits of information, such as nonsense syllables, we impose meaning on such forms, and this facilitates the task of remembering. We make the world meaningful, and such meaning is arrived at through collaborative constructions involving others. A focus, then, on memory as re-production, memory 'as is', only provides insights into a very limited aspect of memory; there is also a need for attention to memory as re-construction, memory 'as if' (Moghaddam, 2002). Psychologists are now giving more importance to this second approach to memory.

The claim that psychology deals with the 'as is' and literature with the 'as if' becomes even more problematic when we consider collective social behavior. An example is Sherif's (1966) studies on intergroup relations, referred to earlier in relation to Golding's explorations of group and intergroup dynamics. Sherif studied boys (all white, middle class, Christian) in a summer camp, organizing their lives in four sequential stages: (1) spontaneous friendship formation; (2) group formation, arranged so that 'best

friends' selected in stage one were separated and placed in different groups; (3) intergroup competition, during which the boys were involved in competitive games, rivalry and eventually fighting and intensely negative intergroup attitudes; and (4) intergroup cooperation, when superordinate goals, desired by all groups but unattainable by any group alone, were introduced. Can such studies be accurately described as getting at behavior 'as it is', as opposed to Golding and other writers, who are assumed to get at behavior 'as it might be'?

Golding develops a story about a group of English schoolboys who are stranded on a deserted island. Just as with the boys in Sherif's study, the boys in *Lord of the Flies* start off as one group, but get divided into two groups at a second stage. The split comes about as a result of the leadership aspirations of Jack, an authoritarian who devotes himself to hunting, first animals and then other boys. Attracted by the excitement of hunting and killing, and pressured by Jack and his sadistic henchman, Roger, the boys one by one desert the more rational, democratic group, to join the alternative, dictatorial group. By the end of the novel, the democratic and dictatorial groups are at war, and the tide has completely turned against the more 'civilized' tendencies among the boys.

Sherif's (1966) study was about the behavior of actual boys, whereas Golding's novel was about fictional boys. However, in important ways both Sherif and Golding get at the 'as if': life as it might be. Consider, for example, that Sherif imposes an arbitrary structure onto the behavior under study: why four stages of group and intergroup development, why not 14 or 44? Also, consider what is often touted as Sherif's most important contribution: his introduction of superordinate goals as a means of getting the two groups to cooperate. Again, we find an arbitrary structure, interpretation and story-telling: were there really two groups when superordinate goals were introduced? There are persuasive alternatives to Sherif's way of telling the story, such as the following. The groups Sherif created in stages two and three were functional, formed around specific tasks. At stage four, a superordinate goal is introduced, and this essentially means that the boys were placed back into one all-inclusive group. They did not experience a problem arriving at peace, because they were no longer in two different groups, they were all in one group.

An implication of this analysis is that in some domains of behavior, psychology, like literature, is primarily focused on the 'as if' rather than the 'as is'. For example, like Golding, Sherif is mainly achieving an analysis of group norms and behavior in meaning systems; he is telling a story in a particular way, presumably because he believes it is the most persuasive way. This important commonality leads us to consider a more unconventional possibility: that at a higher level of abstraction, psychology *is* literature.

## C.4: Psychology is Literature

> *. . . it still strikes me myself as strange that the case studies I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science.* (Freud, 1895/1955, p. 160)

A close reading of observations made by a number of insightful psychologists, such as Freud, as quoted above, reveals that the idea 'psychology is literature' is not new, and is in line with the writings of various researchers who have explored 'life as authoring' (see Kozulin, 1998, particularly Ch. 6; also see Bruner, 1986). In some respects, this claim reminds us of Billig's (1982) argument that social psychology 'is history' and Gergen's (1973) earlier thesis depicting social psychology 'as history'. Both Billig and Gergen highlight the idea that the discipline of psychology and its research 'products' are located in, and shaped by, a particular historical and cultural context. Any attempt to understand, explain, predict or control behavior involves fundamentally important interpretive endeavors on the part of researchers. For example, researchers must interpret what is behavior, what is a research instrument, and what constitute 'data'. Without a shared culture, researchers would find it impossible to recognize and agree on what 'data' are. The interpretation as data of the properties of a phenomenon, such as some aspect of behavior by a psychologist or a jaw-bone by a physical anthropologist or an isolated enzyme by a biochemist or a DNA sequence by a bioengineer, is based on shared scientific culture and involves the ascription of meaning. Through interpretation, researchers construct 'stories' about given sets of phenomena, commonly recognized by their particular community as 'data'. In traditional scientific journals, such stories are constructed according to strict plans, typically involving at a minimum: introduction, methods and procedures, results and discussion.

From a cultural viewpoint, scientific 'story construction' and 'persuading' are in certain respects similar to all story construction and attempts to persuade. It is too simplistic to assume that scientific 'persuading' is strictly limited to deductive/inductive reasoning (see the readings in Pera & Shea, 1991; also Gross, 1990); the weight of critical research leads to the conclusion that 'there is no longer any doubt that scientists use typically rhetorical arguments in addition to deductive and inductive ones' (Pera, 1994, p. 97). What, then, does the story-teller do?

Most importantly, the story-teller must conform to certain rules and norms that are shared by the particular community for which the story is being told. Such rules and norms are of course arbitrary. For example, in psychology the criteria of $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ have been selected as representing acceptable 'levels of significance' for 'findings'. A probability of $p < .06$ or $p < .07$ is 'marginally significant'. There is no objective basis for such interpretations. Instead of $p < .05$ and $p < .01$, psychologists could have interpreted as significant $p < .00123$ or $p < .0719$, or any other probability

level from an infinite set of possibilities. But the contemporary culture of psychology demands that story-telling proceed using these particular probability levels.

Scientific story-telling also shares with other kinds of story-telling the necessity of socialization: the young have to be trained to tell stories (as well as receive them) according to the norms and rules of their cultures. Consider the following examples: the young have to learn the organization of the story, into parts, chapters, and so on, or into an 'introduction, methods, results, discussion' sequence. They also have to learn to discuss the central characters (e.g. experimenters, confederates, participants) and the plot or mystery to be explored, typically entailed in the 'hypotheses' in traditional research (e.g. 'the purpose of this experiment is to examine the relationships between heat and aggression'). The language appropriate for story-telling also has to be learned: such as in the case of the 'objective' language used to tell the story of experiments ('do not use an informal, personal style'). Because scientific story-telling is taught and the young are carefully socialized to become active participants in the scientific community, we can gain valuable insights about scientific story-telling by studying books used to instruct the young, such as standard 'research methods' books used for teaching psychology undergraduates (e.g. Solso, Johnson, & Beal, 1998). Such books instruct the young how to see the world 'correctly' as a 'scientist'.

A set of phenomena interpreted as 'data' could be described in countless different ways. It is the task of 'research methods' instruction books to teach the young to interpret 'data' one particular way, and to see this particular way as the correct way. Similarly, the young learn the culturally appropriate way of interpreting the 'methods' used to gather 'data'. For example, in standard psychology research methods texts, the laboratory experiment is described as a controlled space in which independent variables (assumed causes) are manipulated in order to measure their impact on dependent variables (assumed effects). This causal interpretation is central to the way traditional psychologists tell the story of their laboratory experiments. But this is just one among many possible stories about the laboratory experiment. For example, Moghaddam and Harré (1992) told the story a different way: the dramatist (experimenter) stages a play (experiment) which has a script and plot (methods, procedure and hypotheses) known to all the players (scientists, confederates, etc.) except one (the naïve participant). The lone character who does not know the script and plot has to improvise. Like most others in the same situation, the naïve participant uses the guides available on the set to arrive at a best guess as to what to do. Of course, some naïve participants see it as appropriate to leave the set and not play a part in the drama. These individuals are typically not included in the final version of the story of the experiment, because they did not 'buy into' the drama.

The argument, then, is that 'doing psychology' is in some ways like

'doing literature': they both involve telling a story according to cultural conventions accepted by a particular community. Many types of communications problems arise when such story-telling attempts to reach across cultures, even when the cultures are within the same broad discipline. For example, despite attempts to develop 'mixed methods' that would be appropriate across disciplines, the norms and rules for telling the story of a study are in some key ways very different across communities of experimental psychologists and discursive psychologists (see Moghaddam, Walker, & Harré, 2002). Communications across groups seldom take place, because each lives and works in the confines of specialized niches (Moghaddam, 1997). When a member of one cultural group tries to tell the story of a study in their own language and according to their own conventions to the members of an out-group, by publishing in the journals of the out-group for example, they are typically rejected because they have not followed the 'accepted' conventions of the out-group (such as reporting 'significance' levels in the 'correct' way). Thus, psychology and literature are similar in that they both involve story-telling within and according to the normative system of a particular culture.

## Final Note: An Example of a Future Research Avenue

In reviewing a range of possible relationships between psychology and literature, I noted that the relationship that has received by far the most intensive research attention has been 'literature as understood through psychology'(B.3 above). However, neither this nor any other option was described as superior, because each option is to a certain degree viable and defendable at a particular level of abstraction. The option that does stand out in terms of being more provocative, and also perhaps more expansive and nurturing of cultural research, is the last one presented, 'psychology is literature'. A way to highlight another aspect of 'psychology is literature' is to focus on important characteristics that are shared by both psychology and literature. The use of figurative language, particularly metaphors, is an example of such phenomena.

There is now an impressive body of research exploring how metaphors are not 'just' a figure of speech and 'ornamental', but a 'mental mapping' that in important ways shapes the way people think in their everyday and professional lives (Glucksberg, 2001; Katz, Cacciari, Gibbs, & Turner, 1998). Put boldly, the assertion is that by providing people (including literary writers and psychologists) with particular ways of metaphorically viewing the world, one is shaping how they perceive issues, as well as define and solve problems. The pervasive influence of metaphors is reflected, for example, in Sternberg's (1990) discussion on the 'metaphors of mind', including such widely used metaphors as the 'geographical metaphor', the

'computational metaphor', the 'biological metaphor', the 'epistemological metaphor', the 'anthropological metaphor' and the 'sociological metaphor'.

The study of figures of speech in literature and in psychology could further highlight important overlaps, as well as strengthen links, between the two disciplines. Furthermore, if the association between figures of speech and styles of thinking is as close as suggested, then figures of speech in different languages could be used to better understand cultural variations in cognition. In addition to studying figures of speech in the everyday lives of non-Western populations, a particular focus of such research should be indigenous metaphors incorporated in the literature and psychology of non-Western societies. Just as certain forms of language, such as the 'computational metaphor', have come to dominate Western literature and psychology, other forms, such as the 'spiritual metaphor', have come to dominate the literature and indigenous psychology of certain non-Western societies. Understanding figurative language, such as the spiritual metaphor, in non-Western societies could help bridge important gaps in cultural understanding, such as between the Western and Islamic worlds.

### Note

1. In this paper famous novels with many editions will not be referenced, except when a work is directly quoted.

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