Performance Capacity and Performance Style

Looking Back and Moving Forward in Psychology

Fathali M. Moghaddam
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT. My point of departure is Mills' proposal that we should break with existing research paradigms in psychology. Traditional psychology is deterministic and assumes (efficient) causation; a second, 'normative', psychology is evolving with an emphasis on meaning and context. Narrative is a shared focus of normative psychology and literature. Normative psychology facilitates the achievement of predictability, as well as universals, in accounts of thought and action.

KEY WORDS: causation, literature, narratives, normative psychology, performance

The relationship between psychology and literature can usefully be conceptualized in three broad categories, varying in levels of abstraction: this is the framework for my earlier discussion on psychology and literature (Moghaddam, 2004). At the lowest level of abstraction is 'psychology in literature': literature as a source of psychological data, literature as a source of insights for psychology. The second level of abstraction involves literature as an independent variable, literature as a dependent variable, and literature as understood through psychology. At the third and highest level of abstraction are: 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.

After critically assessing each type of relationship between psychology and literature at different levels of abstraction, and highlighting shortcomings in each type, I showed my preference by stating, 'The option that does stand out in terms of being more provocative, and also perhaps more expansive and nurturing of cultural research, is ... "psychology is literature"' (Moghaddam, 2004, p. 521). At the highest level of abstraction, I argued, both scientific and literary enterprises involve story-telling using

rhetorical arguments, put forward according to the normative system of particular cultures. I suggested that the use of figurative language, such as metaphors, serves as an important common ground for psychology and literature.

In his response to my proposal, Mills (2006) did not address the framework of my paper, the distinctions I made between different levels of abstraction, but put forward a variety of intriguing points without clarifying the particular level of abstraction being addressed. Rather than guess the particular level of abstraction Mills was addressing in each point he raised, I use as the springboard for this discussion the important proposal that he ends with (p. 836): that we should break with existing research paradigms in psychology. In particular, I advocate a move toward a psychology that shares with literature a key characteristic: a focus on meaning. The framework for such a 'second psychology' is already under construction, founded on a long line of scholarship that stretches from Vygotsky (1962), to Bruner (1990), to Harré (1998), to Billig (2005).

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Human thought and action involves two different types of performance (Moghaddam, 2002): *performance capacity*, how well individuals can do things (how well they can hear, see, smell, etc.); and *performance style*, the meanings ascribed to what people do. Behavior in the domain of perform-ance capacity can be adequately explained by causal accounts: Joe suffers a blow to the head in an accident and this causes him to experience memory impairment. Behavior in the domain of performance style requires a normat-ive account: the meaning given to Joe's memory impairment depends on local culture (e.g. interpretations could include 'Joe has lost his memory because he is being punished by God for his sinful ways' or 'Things like this always happen to Joe because he is so careless').

The two types of performance, then, require two different accounts of behavior, the first being causal and the second normative. Causal accounts incorporate cause–effect relations, with 'cause' here understood as what Aristotle called *efficient causality*: the cause precedes the effect it causes. This is the interpretation of cause adopted in traditional psychological research, where independent variables (assumed causes) are manipulated to measure their impact on dependent variables (assumed effects). The assump-tion in traditional psychology is that all thoughts and actions are causally determined and that 'behavior follows cause and effect . . . and anyone planning to do research on behavior is almost forced to start with this assumption' (Kalat, 2005, pp. 5–6).[1]

But behavior in the realm of performance style requires a very different type of explanation, one that is more in line with what Aristotle referred to

as *final causation*, an end or purpose of natural processes, and *formal causation*, the form or structure of a process. (In addition, while 'science' is interpreted in traditional psychology as involving efficient causation, advances in quantum mechanics, organic chemistry, biology, genetics and other 'real' scientific enterprises do not follow such mechanistic lines: see, e.g., Hattiangadi, 2005.) In order to get at purposes and processes in human behavior, psychologists need to pay closer attention to the narratives people use to make sense of their lives, to ascribe meaning and purpose to events and behaviors, and to structure their activities in different contexts (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). But would a focus on meaning, context and narrative accounts result in psychology abandoning ambitions of predicting behavior and discovering universals? I believe not, as I argue below.

Predicting Behavior

> The test of determinism is ultimately empirical: If everything we do has a cause, our behavior should be predictable. (Kalat, 2005, p. 5)

A foundational assumption in traditional psychology is that behavior is predictable because it is causally determined (in the sense of efficient causality). The implication, sometimes made explicit, is that if we abandon the assumption of determinism, then we also have to abandon the goal of predicting behavior. Interestingly, in order to make his point, Kalat (2005) uses either examples that involve human behavior in what I have termed the realm of performance capacity (e.g. 'if you hear a sudden, unexpected, extremely loud noise, I can predict that, unless you are deaf, in a coma, or paralyzed, you will tense your muscles', p. 5), or examples that involve the natural world (e.g. predicting tomorrow's weather, p. 5). My contention is that rejecting determinism does not equate with losing predictive power, in the domain of either performance capacity or performance style (dealing with meaning systems). In the remainder of this discussion, I concern myself with behavior in the domain of performance style.

Psychology as a normative science proposes that human thought and action are regulated by norms, rules, values and other aspects of normative systems. The difference between following norms and being subject to causal laws is not 'mere semantics'. Individuals have some measure of choice, and manifest a level of intentionality, in adopting particular normative systems to adhere to. Adherence to a normative system necessarily manifests as regularity and predictability in thought and action. For example, students who register for my seminar in psychology and literature show certain behavioral regularities: in the spring of each year, they come together in one place at 11:40 a.m., Mondays and Wednesdays, and they discuss specific topics in an order set out in the syllabus. Much of their behavior in the setting of the seminar is predictable; but they could choose to do

otherwise. For example, on a fine spring day they could decide to enjoy the weather outside and not participate in my seminar. Or a student might decide to join the seminar group, but remain silent and sleep through the entire discussion (not reacting to jibes and paper missiles launched by the other students).

How does predictability achieved through a normative approach compare with predictability achieved through a causal approach? If we adopt an approach that assumes that most of the time most people do what they think is the 'correct' thing to do in any given situation, do we not lose the predictive power of a causal model? For example, consider what is probably the most famous and influential laboratory experiment in the history of social psychology, Milgram's (1974) studies on obedience to authority. Surely a normative approach would have a large number of participants disobeying the authority figure and refusing to administer high levels of electric shock to the (supposed) learner? Indeed, this is exactly what took place. About 35 percent of participants did not fully obey, meaning they refused to give the highest voltage level. In traditional research, 'variation' in responses is treated as noise, and focus is placed on the effects of assumed causal mechanisms. As Kalat (2005, p. 5) notes, predictability is assumed to reflect the validity of a deterministic model.

A foundational claim of normative psychology is that thought and action are guided and made predictable by narratives: the stories that people tell and listen to about themselves and others. Narratives follow certain cultural conventions and are used to position the self and others within particular moral domains; integral to such domains being *rights*, demands placed on others by the person who possesses it, and *duties*, demands placed by others on the person who owes it. Consider, for example, the positioning strategy used by Hamlet in a speech asking forgiveness from Laertes for having killed his father:

> Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong.
> But pardon't, as you are a gentleman.
> This presence knows, and you must needs have heard,
> How I am punished with a sore distraction.
> What I have done
> That might your nature, honour, and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
> Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not. Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. If't it be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged.
> (*Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2, 220–232)

As a gentleman, Laertes is 'obligated' to forgive Hamlet, because the wrong was done by Hamlet's madness *against* Hamlet, who is now himself positioned as a victim with certain rights that have been violated. But in response to a proposal that psychologists focus on such narratives and positioning, critics might contend that this kind of an alternative approach would mean abandoning the search for psychological universals and being mired in relativism. This is not the case, as is made clear in the next section.

Universals in Performance Style: The Example of Turn-taking

> *Polonius:* What do you read, my lord?
> *Hamlet:* Words, words, words.
> *Polonius:* What is the matter my lord?
> *Hamlet:* Between who?
> *Polonius:* I mean the matter that you read, my lord.
> *Hamlet:* Slanders, sir. For the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, and their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams; all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down. For yourself, sir, shall grow old as I am—if, like a crab, you could go backward.
> *Polonius (aside):* Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.
> (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2, 191–206)

> *Researcher:* In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemyla is in the Far North . . . What color are the bears there?
> *Respondent:* We always speak of only what we see, we don't talk about what we haven't seen.
> *Researcher:* But what do my words imply? (*Repeats syllogism*)
> *Respondent:* Well, it's like this: our tsar isn't like yours, and your isn't like ours. Your words can be answered only by someone who was there, and if a person wasn't there, he can't say anything on the basis of your words.
> (Luria, 1976, p. 108)

The two passages above, the first from *Hamlet* and the second from the field research of Alexander Luria, both involve misunderstanding between interlocutors. In the first, Hamlet is purposely creating a distance between himself and Polonius by feigning madness (although Polonius sees some logic in Hamlet's expressions); in the second, the distance arises because the respondent does not think in a way that is expected by the researcher, who tries (unsuccessfully) to get the respondent to apply syllogistic logic. Despite the gap in communications, however, the two dialogues involve an important universal in social behavior: turn-taking. Even when communica-

tions seems to have broken down at the 'surface' level of incompatible logic used by interlocutors, at a deeper level those involved in the social exchange continue to take turns in speaking.

Turn-taking is an example of *primitive social relations*, functional behavioral repertoires that emerged early in human evolution and improved the survival chances of groups that adopted them (Moghaddam, 2002). As evolutionary processes progressed and cultural differences emerged between human groups, turn-taking was interpreted according to local moral orders as involving rights and/or duties. In contemporary societies, turn-taking regulates a vast variety of activities and contexts, including the local and mundane (e.g. turn-taking at stop signs on roads), social rituals (turn-taking in gift-giving and playing host/guest), legal (e.g. turn-taking in the cross-examination of witnesses in law courts) and political (turn-taking enforced by term-limits to political offices). Although there is cultural variation in the particular domains in which turn-taking is practiced (e.g. turn-taking is not practiced in the political domain in all cultures), it is present in all cultures in some domains (e.g. in communications). Normative psychology highlights turn-taking and other such universals in human behavior.

Concluding Comment

The narrative turn in psychology involves a break from existing causal research paradigms (in line with Mills, 2006) and the adoption of normative accounts of behavior. The search for universals and predictability in thought and action is facilitated, not hindered, by the normative approach. Furthermore, psychology as a normative science can incorporate a variety of research methods, including laboratory studies (see Moghaddam, 2005, Ch. 2), and can allow for the bridging of the gap between psychology and literature.

Note

1. I have selected to quote Kalat's text because it is a fairly accurate reflection of contemporary traditional psychology and is typical of dozens of other introductory psychology texts.

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FATHALI M. MOGHADDAM is Professor of Psychology at Georgetown University. His most recent books are *From the Terrorists' Point of View* (Praeger, 2006) and *Great Ideas in Psychology: A Cultural and Historical Introduction* (Oneworld, 2005). ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA 20057. [email: moghaddf@georgetown.edu]