

Summary

Modern psychology attempts to extend the methods of science to the realm of understanding human behaviour. This research argues that understanding human behaviour is fundamentally different from understanding the behaviour of objects like, say, two balls on a billiards table. Human beings have the unique privilege of being able to initiate action, a quality which billiard balls and other objects singularly lack. Under the circumstances, it would be inappropriate to extend the methodological and analytical tools of a positivistic science to human behaviour.

William Dilthey (Rickman, 1976) laid the foundation for an alternative approach to the social sciences, through Hermeneutics. He did this by extending the insights gained by Friedrich Schliermarcher in the field of textual exegesis to the understanding of human behaviour (Ricoeur, 1973a, pp. 116-117). According to this view, understanding human behaviour means grasping the intentions that lie behind a person's acts.

If human behaviour is intentional, then each action is unique and has its own intention behind it, and there cannot be any general description of human action. Under the circumstances, the social scientist is faced with the daunting task of building a general science out of individual actions. Yet, we are able to make generalisations regarding human behaviour. We are able to say, for example, that most drivers would stop their cars at a red traffic light. But the traffic light exerts no causal influence on the drivers. The law at work here is a social **convention**, and not a causal one. Similarly it seems that other social laws, too, are conventional (Eskola, 1988, pp.167-171.). Hence it seems that another difference between the natural scientist and the social scientist is that the latter attempts to understand conventional laws, while the focus of the natural scientist is natural laws (assumed to be causal). The distinction between *explanation* and *understanding* was thought to distinguish the social sciences from the natural sciences. However, this becomes problematic when we consider linguistics rather than natural sciences.

Language is one system of conventions that has received a lot of consideration. Due to the problem of creating a general science out of individual intentional acts, stated earlier, linguists have limited their enquiry to the general system of language and have largely ignored the instances when language is actually used. However, it is important to bear in mind that the very purpose of language is to say something about something (Ricoeur, 1974). What is more, the person who hears is able to understand what is being said, because both the speaker and the listener share the same system of signs.

We are able to draw a parallel between human action and textual interpretation because, similar to the way that writing outlives the moment it is produced, human action gets **fixed**. Records of it exist, if only in the minds of observers. Further more, once it is fixed in this fashion, it is open to multiple interpretations (Ricoeur, 1981).

When anything is open to multiple interpretations, it brings up the question of the limit of interpretation (Eco, 1992, pp.45-66.). This limit is better understood in contrast with another word, *misinterpretation*. Viewed in this context, one can see that an interpretation has to be at least potentially true. If an interpretation is conclusively seen to be false, then it is no longer an interpretation, but a mis-interpretation. This is to say, in other words, that there are limits to interpretations, although it is not specified what these limits are precisely.

Many fine arts depend on the ability to interpret a text in different ways. Different renditions of a symphony, and different performances of the same play are examples of this. In contrast, science attempts to reduce the scope for multiple interpretations in order to arrive at an "*authentic*" description of the universe. To achieve this, scientists try to reduce ambiguity as much as possible.

Natural language is an ideal tool to refer to the complex universe around us. The ambiguities and the polysemic nature of language allows us to use a limited vocabulary to signify almost an infinite variety of things. The scientist finds that natural language has many ambiguities of meaning. In order to remedy this, he attempts to build up an artificial language. Such a language is mostly mathematical, where each term is connected to other terms in a precise way. Even when he uses a word from natural language, the scientist is careful to define it so that there is no ambiguity in the meaning. In the scientific discourse, words are shorn of their rich links to many other words in the natural language. A simplification, almost a sterilisation takes place.

However, the language and style of writing marks a text as a "social science research report". If we compare discourses to languages, we may say that a political unit, like a country, has its own language which is distinct from that of its neighbour. At the boundary between the two units, one often finds dialects that incorporate elements from both languages. In such situations, it is a political choice as to whether the region falls within this unit or that one. The current thesis is written in a *boundary discourse* which is close to natural language, yet distinct enough to be considered as a work in social science.

Some degree of simplification is unavoidable. Since any description involves simplification, the work discussed here is no exception. Simplification allows us to bring a greater focus to bear on certain elements of the reality around us by letting other aspects sink into the background. It is important to remember that social science reports, as is the case of autobiographies and photographs, are not simple descriptions of life, but part of life and there is no greater truth in them than in any other part of life (Adams, 1994, p. 467).

Typically, a social science report describes research as an autonomous activity, bearing no significant links with the historical circumstances in which it is conducted. Such a depiction is necessary in order to construct social science as the authentic description of social reality. Through the thesis, a deliberate attempt has been made to

construct social science differently. It describes the process of research as one that involves a series of personal choices, rather than as an autonomous process. It describes some of the historical circumstances in which the research was conducted. Most important, the research is presented as one person's interpretation of the experiences that it talks about (the first person singular pronoun is used throughout the text in order to highlight the fact).

One of the foci of this research has been the question of identity and transformation. It appears that much of the way we relate to others and the world around us depends on who we think we are. Hence, it would follow that if we are to have a new way of relating to the world around us, it would necessarily involve a new understanding of oneself. One way of asking "*Who is John Smith?*" would be to ask what the words "*John Smith*" mean. (The words "John Smith" can be substituted with "I" if needed). As we have discussed earlier, in the context of words and their meanings, it appears difficult to answer the question, unless it is in the context of a specific statement. The answer could be that John Smith is the person wearing a red shirt sitting third from the left, or it could be that John Smith is a sensitive fellow who works hard at social issues. Hence it would seem that the answer to the question depended a lot on the context in which it is asked. One way to achieve a new understanding (interpretation) of one's self would be to explore it in a new context.

For a study of identity and transformation, two sites were chosen. The first site was an institution of Western Medicine and the second a centre for faith healing. Chronic severe physical disability requires a person to make changes in the way he or she relates to the world. It seemed likely that one would find such people in a hospital. Hence the first site is a hospital ward, which allows us to view the context Western Medicine offers to the re-interpretation of the person's identity. The second site was chosen because it explicitly emphasises personal transformation. This would allow us to look at the question of identity and transformation in a very different context.

In the place of taking individual case studies, a site analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984.) was conducted, emphasising the interpersonal context rather than individual narratives. The term *participant-observer* is the closest description of the method adopted, though the conjoint words also indicate a paradox that lies at the heart of the method, that of the irreconcilable difference between the observer and the participant. At the first site, a series of discussions and interviews were conducted, while the code of conduct at the second site prohibited any conversation, and hence the experiential (Barrell, et. al., 1987) method was followed here.

The method of analysis has been the method of textual analysis. The research programme was conceived as a whole and always kept in mind as a unit. Each individual part was examined for emerging meanings that add to the whole, and in the meanwhile, the whole was constantly re-interpreted in the context of new meanings that emerged from the parts, thus constituting a Hermeneutic Circle (Rickman, 1976, p.10.).

At the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at the Medical College, Trivandrum, most in-patients consisted of people from the lower socio-economic strata, people who worked for daily wages in agricultural fields and stone quarries around the area. The society they live in is an organic one, where families have been living in the same locality, if not the same house, for generations and, in the rural, set-up most people knew one another other. In such an organic society, identity seems to be more closely linked to the person's relationships with other people, than to the historical narrative which is the basis for identity in more individualistic societies. When we think of *modern* society (here, the word *modern* is used in the sense of it being *modernistic*), we often think of the latter rather than the former.

The PMR Department lies at the boundary of Western Medicine. The methods of treatment employed are non-invasive, such as physiotherapy, heat application, fitting of prosthesis, etc. Surgical and pharmacological interventions, which have become the symbols of Western Medicine, are noticeably absent (though some palliative medicines are used). Since the discourse of medicine is not so strong in the department, a number of alternative discourses make their presence felt, giving us a clearer understanding of the way in which different discourses relate to each other in the same site.

Western Medicine as a whole, has little to offer by way of inner transformation, even though the PMR Department offers patients a greater role in the treatment of their disability. In most cases, patients are required to have patience, while the doctor does the work. The second site, the Vincentian Meditation Centre, Potta, Chalakkudy primarily emphasises inner transformation. Despite this, many people think of the place a centre for faith healing.

If the self can be described as a selectively built up narrative, that places the person's present identity in the context of a past and a future, then inner transformation can be described as a re-interpretation of this narrative. This re-interpretation is achieved by placing the narrative in a different context. For example, on approaching the centre, a sick person told that in God's sight he is complete. In this way a person who has always thought of himself as disabled feels a sense of relief. The physical disability may or may not be solved, but the person accepts himself as he is.

This kind of re-interpretation is possible only in the context of some authority. This authority is derived from the values and belief systems of the society to which the institution belongs to. The actual re-interpretation is achieved by the mind-set which forms the context in which experiences at the site are viewed, and by techniques that include chanting and clapping of hands (both activities that require him to publicly do certain acts which he would not do under different conditions).

In order to sustain this transformation after the person has gone back to the community, he is asked to re-work his relationships within the community. This is achieved with the help of the local parish vicar, establishing the new identity on a long term basis.

This research argues for a non-positivistic psychology as a science of meanings. It not only critically evaluates the existing discourse of psychology, it also tries to develop an alternative discourse and illustrate it by example. It describes two different ways to conceptualise identity, either as a historical narrative or in relationship with others. To the field of medicine, it offers the opportunity to look at the social and ritualistic aspects of medical practice and to see healing within the context of a "healing community", even within the ward, rather than purely as a mechanical or chemical phenomenon.

In the thesis itself, this discussion is presented in two parts, One and Two. Part One which consists of the first three chapters, introduces certain theoretical considerations that the hermeneutic approach is based on. Part Two, which consists of the next three chapters, discusses these considerations in the context of observations made by the author during his visits to the field. **The first chapter** introduces Hermeneutic concerns for the study of human behaviour, while **the second** looks at how science constitutes itself as an authentic description of reality. **The third chapter** discusses the concerns in the context of social science and the present work. **The fourth and fifth chapters** discuss these concerns in the context of observations made at the two sites. **The final chapter** describes the outcome, some of the implications of the study, and the course future inquiry could take.

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