

Preface

Modern academic and experimental psychology is to a large extent a science dealing with alienated man, studied by alienated investigators with alienated and alienating methods.

(Fromm, 1973: 69)

I always thought that psychology goes on in the writing. So one of the questions I used to ask myself was how do you write psychology? Well, you must write it so that it touches the soul, or it's not psychology. It has to have that moving quality of experience, and that means it has to have many sorts of metaphors and absurdities and things that go with life. Otherwise you're writing an academic or a scientific description of something but it's no longer psychology.

(Hillman, in Hillman & Shamdasani, 2013: 200)

Experiences are subjective facts. They bind us to the earth and give us a presence amidst the whirlwinds of fate, in which we are all, in one way or another, psychologically complicit. A lot of what is done in the name of psychotherapy and psychology nowadays is driven by motives which are base, shallow and commercial. Theorising the human condition too often follows the ideological fashions of the day which can so easily be described in an age of 'terror' as biological/corporate fundamentalism. This toxic mixture not only bewitches the general public but also makes epistemological (and increasingly commercial) slaves of professional psychologists.

By common consent psychology is still a young science. One of the presumed characteristics of any science is that new knowledge eventually replaces old, that previous errors of fact and reasoning give way to advances in wisdom, method and agreed fact. Psychology, however, unlike the traditional sciences of physics, chemistry and biology, has failed to develop in this way, since it will never be a natural science. Like economics, its partner in crime in pseudo science, psychology has continued to 'ignore empirical evidence that contradicts mainstream theories in favour of "overly technical

nonsense”¹ and has studiously neglected the insights of past thinkers who have reflected on the human condition. Addicted to the use of quantitative methods and technologies capable of visualising activity in the brain, psychologists have hoped that recourse to these methods will somehow cover up the prevailing bankruptcy of ideas and enhance its reputation as a bona fide science. Despite the interest in consciousness as the great unsolved mystery there is hardly a move to learn from those who have given considered attention to the nature of human experience. As Fromm (1973: 82) argues, Marx attacked ‘the prevalent opinion that consciousness is the ultimate datum and the quality of all psychic life’. Marx’s view, that consciousness is the product of a social life tied to a particular system of socio-economic relations, has gained increasing credence among critical social psychologists but remains utterly ignored by the majority who cling to the desiccated fruits of positivism. The pretence that psychology is just like any other natural science can only be maintained by repressing knowledge such as this.

In this book we explore how this state of affairs – the covert politicisation of experience and selling knowledge to the highest bidder – has arisen, how it continues unabated, and in whose interests it does so. One of its consequences is that the very voice we employ to articulate our understanding of the human condition, whether in the midst of the therapeutic encounter, reflecting on the therapeutic encounter or theorising it, has become infected with psychology’s hunger for status, power and control all masked by an ill-judged pretence of neutrality and objectivity. This has made the relationship between the practical and academic sides of psychology deeply problematic. Rarely, if at all, do they speak to one another in a common and human frame of reference and rarely is this problem even acknowledged. For all clinical psychology’s aspirations to produce scientific practitioners, the audiences for psychotherapeutic and academic discourse remain largely distinct. The approach we have chosen to take in unravelling this is analytic, historical, personal and experiential. In our attempt to bridge this gap we seek to return to a fresh and new *Politics of Experience*. This must begin we believe from our own experiences – both in the lived worlds we inhabit and in our respective professional domains of psychotherapeutic and academic practice. One of our purposes here is to bring not only these two distinct discourses together but to conjoin our professional lives to our personal ones. From there we can move out on a practical

and theoretical journey which privileges experience. Herein lies the hope that psychology may one day be free of the alienation that has bedevilled it. From this personal (and interpersonal) bedrock, informed by our fieldwork we examine movements to empower people in the mental health and education systems, looking at the cultivation of resilience, intellectual and emotional self-defence. What is it that helps people, in and out of psychotherapy, to help themselves and marshal a continuous practice of awareness and wellbeing? At the same time we continually reflect on the wellbeing and health of our own professions. What is the promise of a thorough and ruthless re-visioning of psychotherapy and psychology in our day and age?

So what exactly are you about to read? In the opening chapters, we reflect on our own origins and visions and the fundamental assumptions which have driven the disciplines of psychology and psychotherapy. From our respective existential and professional origins each of us brings a set of experiences, ideas and visions to be coupled with (or decoupled from) the professional traditions in which we operate. Thus we come to examine how apprenticeship training and self-experiential exercises inform the stances taken in professional work and presence. As persons engaged in professions we both enjoy and cherish, we ask how the personal inspires our professional habits and vice versa. Starting from the position that experience is the basis of any theory, we look to expose the core experiences, practices and assumptions which inform the variety of our approaches as psychologists and psychotherapists. By looking at what we actually do and have done we are concerned to provide an in-depth picture of how reflexivity actually operates in practice as opposed to a sanitised academic presentation of it. This necessarily entails that we must speak with (at least) two voices and on occasion different styles and idioms. This is unavoidable as we traverse the multiple gaps between theory, method, practice and experience. As we dance between description and analysis, experience and reflection, the levels of harmony and disharmony between practice and theory will move in and out of play. Sometimes the traumas of life lead us to speak with what sounds like different voices, embodying different plans, life histories and goals. Such multiplicity is not always a 'bad' thing. Unlike a lot of what passes for psychology, we do not wish to lie, fabricate, or mislead. What you will presently find in these pages is what we honestly believe and know is there. It is a conversation between us as much as with you the reader. Laing was never able

to satisfactorily resolve the question of how psychological practice and theory could remain fully human and avoid depersonalising, alienating or mystifying its subject. This book is our attempt to see how much further we can push the argument. Throughout this, the subject matter is and will always remain the human 'us'.

In the centre of the book we turn to Laing's work. A specific area in which the fruits of Marx's insights were applied to psychological life was Laing and Esterson's studies of family life. First of all we examine its relevance for understanding forms of social and collective memory. This calls attention to the intergenerational passage of a wider social form of memory in which our collective behavioural past is recalled, relived and re-presented from one generation to the next. Bringing psychoanalytic insight to historical legacy, this chapter lays bare the nature of our fragmented subjective reality in the early twenty-first century. We continue by reflecting on Laing and Esterson's masterly study of thirteen women in the midst of psychiatric and familial mayhem (they initially studied over one hundred families and presented these selections). This chapter provides a critical reading of the dynamics of female power revealed in the original study.

'Therapeutic compassion' is based on Theodor Itten's experiences discussing the role of intuition and science in psychotherapy informed by the unfinished work of R.D. Laing and over thirty years of the author's professional experience. In this exploration deeper issues of the 'Self and Others' are illuminated. Chapter 8 'The politics of memory: Field notes from an urban anthropologist' is a collection of strange tales compiled by Ron Roberts from the urban academic jungle. Spanning murder, corruption, politics and thought control in the ivory towers, these stories reveal not just how truth can be stranger than fiction but why 'fiction' as such has an essential place in understanding the facts of our lives, how it has come to constitute an inseparable part of the real. It is a reminder to our readers that countless stories from our lived real lives find outlets in our professional productions, and we would hope consciously so.

Formerly envisaged as a book with Laing, 'The politics of truth in psychotherapy' is now the title of Chapter 9, where Theodor Itten reflects on the curative and emancipatory aspects of psychotherapy as the two sides of any truth in the process and praxis of healing. The aim here is to extend Laing's work on the politics of the family, synthesising research knowledge on the science and experience of psychotherapy and in so doing to cultivate yet further variations on

the ever-present problematic of how professional stories address the lives of others.²

As befitting the one of us who is engaged in a university, Chapter 10, 'Psychology: Individuals, morality and ideology' is a thorough critique of the politics and limits of methodological individualism in psychology. We are not the first to have misgivings about the elevation of the individual to semi-divine status in our discipline. Thropp (2009), for example, presents a provocative research study on North American culture which she feels is dominated by the language of psychotherapy and a colonial commitment to hyper-individualism, in which psychotherapy and its language game are being employed as panaceas for social problems. The battle between the personal and social in psychology and its relationship to state interests forms the heart of this chapter.

In bringing our insights together in Chapter 11, we resume with an overview of 'The new politics of experience'. Here we ask a series of searching questions about the nature of psychological and psychotherapeutic practice. If we have advanced so far in our understanding of the human condition shouldn't we all be getting well by now? How does contemporary work by professionals match with the experience of patients and mental health service users? What explains the continuous need of professionals to create new approaches and fresh techniques and does this reflect an inner critique of one's own professional competencies? The present trend for diverse movements in empowerment, resilience and wellbeing for both patients and professionals are critically examined. Here we treat subjective experience as evidence based and reflect on just what has been learnt.

We present this book as a cordial challenge to our colleagues in the therapy rooms and ivory towers, to come clean and participate in rejuvenating what is, and continues to be, a search for truth – both in formal knowledge and the nature of human experience. This search is, in our view, a journey which takes us both inside and outside the workings of our selves. Some have called this path 'soul-making', others 'calling and listening to the shade system' (our elders' notion of the unconscious and the collective unconscious). We call this the 'New politics of experience' – a taboo-free journey, as much as that is possible, into the professional, personal and collective unconscious by way of contrast to the regular diet of nonsense, clothed in academic jargon, which behavioural science journals spew out in the interests

of the late-super-capitalist monster. Psychology and psychotherapy are two independent yet related human sciences. It appears, to us at least, that the 'psy' professions, as they garner ever greater public adoration and corporate support, have become entangled in a net of smug self-satisfaction. This is a dangerous moment for us all. Our clarion call here is to disturb that equilibrium – to disturb, unsettle, educate, inform and perhaps also to annoy – in order to create a fresh voice on our experience in the world. This is an adventure to visit unexplored professional territory and return to the lost subject of the soul. Where academic angels fear to tread, novelists have created a world from and for our emotions. We invite you to join the 'resistance movement against the destruction of love in social reality' (P. Tillich, cited in Fromm, 2011: 59).

Your thoughts and reflections are very welcome.

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Endnotes

1. Adam Posen head of the Peterson Institute, a Washington-based think tank (cited in Inman, 2013).
2. See Hillman (1998) for a discussion of the case story as a means of creating healing fictions.