

Thinking Psychologically: Looking Below the Surface

Daniel Benveniste

Behavior is Motivated

There are many different psychological theories, or ways of looking at behavior, but all of them are based on the notion that behavior is motivated. Behavior includes our relationships and relationship problems, depressions, anxieties, creativity, inspiration, work, normal functioning and much more. We can describe behavior as motivated by previous learning, by faulty reasoning, by chemical imbalances, by early childhood experiences, or by patterns in family communication. Theories are ways of looking at a phenomenon and we can look at behavior in many ways. To insist on exclusively using just one way of looking at the world, is a common mistake.

If we ask, Is a cup of coffee brown or wet or delicious? We have no problem saying that it can be all three – that it appears brown, that it feels wet and that it tastes delicious. This is not difficult to understand but what if we ask, Is the disobedient girl in class being naughty or is she upset about what is happening at home? Is the slow moving man lazy or is he depressed? Is the pre-orgasmic woman inhibited or is her lover insensitive to her needs? Is the girl rude or is that the way she was raised? Such questions are considerably more difficult to answer, especially when we recognize that the most significant factors might not even be among the options presented. When we open up to the possibility of multiple factors and factors of different levels of influence, we also make room for ourselves to think more flexibly about possible interventions.

Does the boy with attention problems in class have a biochemical imbalance? Is his family in chaos? Is he overwhelmed by the visual stimulation of the classroom? Did he not have breakfast? Does he have a hearing problem? Is his intellectual ability far above the course material in class leaving him bored or is it far below, leaving him lost? To consider his subjective experience in the problem, we must think psychologically. We must look below the surface.

Events and Experiences - Objects and Relationships

We live in a world that often values objectivity over subjectivity and events over experiences. If you go out on a date the ‘event’ is defined by who, where, when, how, etc. But the anticipation, awkwardness, humor, pleasure, excitement and expectations all belong to the ‘experience’. Many people may go to an ‘event’ but each will have a different ‘experience’ of it. There may be one ‘object’ but each person will have a different ‘relationship’ to it. There is the story of the five blind men and the elephant. Each touched a different part of the elephant and described his experience of it. “An elephant is like a snake” said the man who touched its tail. “No, its like a pillar” said the man who touched its leg. “No, its like a door” said the man who touched its ear. “No, its like a large ball” said the man who touched its belly. Thus, another component of thinking psychologically is recognizing the difference between objectivity and

subjectivity; events and experiences; objects and relationships. To think psychologically is to think in terms of subjectivity, experiences and relationships.

Objectivity is an abstraction based on a set of data. A king used to walk every evening along the beach to watch the sun setting into the sea. As it went down it sent a long shimmering reflection along the surface of the water that pointed directly at the king. And no matter where the king was on the beach that beam of light gliding along the surface of the water always, always, always pointed toward him. He concluded that this was because he was the king. He was immersed in his subjectivity. He was self absorbed, feeling he was the center of the world and concluding he was the center of the world. If he could have studied the natural phenomenon of the sun's reflection with other observers, he might have learned something objective about the world. Objectivity is useful for understanding the nature of the world outside of us. But to understand behavior and to understand ourselves we must attend to the subjective personal experience in relation to objectivity.

Similarly objects are the unknowable things in our world to which we each have a different relationship. A teacher visited a tribal village in the Venezuelan jungles. While speaking with a little indigenous girl the teacher wrote the letter "A" in the sand. The little girl looked at it and said "churuatita" – which means 'little house' and in fact their houses look just like an "A". Thus the object has a different meaning for each person depending upon his/her relationship to that object. But 'objects' can include other people as well. Thus, in a family with five children, they all share the same mother but each child has a unique relationship to and experience of the mother.

We could say that the person, biologically speaking, is anatomy and physiology. And socially, the person is a set of roles shaped by and influencing the social surround. But psychologically, the person is an experiencing being, a set of relationships, a subjectivity. The data of subjective experience are thoughts, feelings, fantasies, self-perceptions, dreams, moods and affects, cognitive functioning, hopes and fears, and so much more. It was Sigmund Freud who helped us to understand, for the first time, that the "experiences" of childhood had a powerful influence in shaping the personality of the adult.

Looking Under the Surface

I once went out on a boat visiting some of the coral reefs surrounding the Venezuelan island paradise of Los Roques. At one point, while sitting on the boat, I noticed a flock of birds frolicking about in one small spot out in the middle of the sea between two islands. "What are they doing there?" I wondered. "And why did they pick that spot to go a little wild?" A moment later I realized the flock of birds were frolicking about over a school of fish that they had come to eat. So in a sense the flock of birds was like a symptom, something observable, on the surface, while the fish below represented the unobservable motivation. To think psychologically is to look under the surface of someone's behavior to determine his/her subjective experience. "He says he's fine but he says it through gritted teeth. So, I don't think everything is as fine as he says it is."

We can also think psychologically about ourselves and wonder, “Why do I do things that are not good for me? Why do I always choose the same kind of people? What does my dream mean? What does my recurring fantasy mean? Why am I so fascinated by my hobby? Why do I like the kinds of books and movies that I like? Why do I prefer these politicians while my co-worker prefers those? Why did I laugh when I heard something sad? Why did I cry when it was such a happy event?” We look at what is on the surface and wonder what might be below the surface motivating our behavior.

Two very useful tools for looking under the surface of behavior are 1) the notion of compensation and 2) metaphor.

The notion of compensation helps us to recognize the often curious relationship between our hopes and our fears, between our desires and our disgust, between the things with which we identify and those that we reject. Compensation helps us to see the child in the mother, the tyrant in the revolutionary, the sinner in the saint, and vice versa. We see how the timid person keeps a lion inside him and how the bully is aggressive only to cover his own vulnerability.

The notion of metaphor is the key to the interpretation of dreams and the discovery of meaning in our fantasies, preoccupations, psychological symptoms and more. When we speak of metaphor, we can wonder about the multiple meanings of the images or themes in dreams, fantasies and the rest.

Dreams are not plans. They speak to us figuratively, not literally. They are filled with analogies and metaphors of our unconscious creation. A dream of death does not mean someone will die. ‘Death’ is a metaphor of surrender, not knowing, anger, return, change or something else. And the person that dies in the dream is not the person in reality but a representation of a part of the dreamer. The figures in our dreams are personifications of parts of our selves. The monster in your dream is a part of you. Even the appearance of one of your parents in your dream is a part of you. A fantasy of glory may be a metaphor of unfulfilled potential or a compensation for a sense of failure. Your relationship to animals may say something about your relationship to your own impulses. Your interest in a certain period in history may speak to a parallel conflict in your own personal history. And your love of detective stories may speak to your careful attention to details and concern about the unknown. A dream is like a message in code, it must be interpreted to be understood.

Similarly, sometimes a life must be interpreted to be understood. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy, which is only one type of psychotherapy, is a way of looking under the surface to locate the unconscious motivations beneath our day-to-day problems and understand them. It is a place to talk about the things that are difficult to talk about, to learn to keep as few secrets from oneself as possible and to do so by decoding the metaphors of our dreams, fantasies, preoccupations, symptoms and the rest. When we understand the meaning or motivation beneath our symptoms or problems in life we often take a step toward resolving those problems.

**The author now lives and works in Bellevue, Washington.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:**

E-MAIL – daniel.benveniste@gmail.com