States of mind: Conversations with psychological investigators edited by J Miller, BBC Publications, London, 1983, 306 pages, £9.95 (US: $14.95)

16. Review: Dialogue with David Rose

Introduction

During the last century, consciousness has moved in and out of fashion as a theme in the psychologist's conception of the mind. From the empiricist philosophers, who considered only conscious mental activity, through Freud's theory of the importance of the unconscious mind, to the Behaviourists' eschewal of any study of mental processes, there was a decline in emphasis on what we are aware of in everyday life—our own subjective experiences. The resurrection of the study of mental life (as William James defined psychology), was triggered mainly by the technological advances made during and since the Second World War, and the notion that, if servomechanisms and signal channels can have expectations, then why not humans too? This revolution has been chronicled by George Miller and Jerome Bruner in the first two interviews of this series, and these and the following thirteen interviews attested to the explosive increase since the war and the enormous diversity of our currently held ideas about the structure and states of the mind.

In the sixteenth and last interview I discuss the series as a whole with Dr David Rose, book reviewer for the journal Perception.

Discussion

Miller What I would like to ask you about first is to what extent you think the book conveys a fair impression of what is going on nowadays in psychology, as psychologists see it.

Rose Well, first of all I would like to make some comment about the medium by which you have tried to convey this impression. The book is based on a series of television interviews, and the style of the book therefore reflects this origin. Now, my colleagues may regard my views as rather extreme on this, but I found the programmes as compulsive to watch as Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy or Brideshead Revisited. I am urging my colleagues in other countries to write to their local or national TV networks demanding that the series be shown locally.

You see, one of the most annoying things for a lecturer is to be told that while speaking in public he should not walk up and down, or wave his arms, or allow any other so-called mannerisms to distract the audience from what he is saying. But concentrating on suppressing those mannerisms itself distracts the lecturer from what he is trying to say, and can in the end turn him into a characterless monologist, so the purpose can be self-defeating. On television the problem can be worse because viewers tend to stare fixedly at the screen, which does not happen at a live lecture. So I suspect that one reason why your interviews were so natural and flowing is that you and your guests were allowed to sit back in armchairs, rest one ankle on the opposite knee, wave a hand in front of the camera, mumble from behind a clenched fist pressed against the mouth, and so on, without the producer signalling desperately to you in alarm from behind the camera. This enabled full concentration on the content or message of the conversation.

The exception, of course, is the irritating habit that philosophers have of inserting "errr" before every other word. Thankfully, you have edited those out of the book.

Miller Well, philosophers worry a lot about the exact meaning of every word. But how do the conversations actually come across in the book?

Rose The book consists 90% of a straightforward transcription of what was said in the TV interviews, together with any accompanying diagrams, and it is interesting to speculate on the remaining 10%. The TV programmes and the book each include some paragraphs which were omitted from the other medium, and I am wondering why that is.

Miller Tell me, how well did you think that the arguments were presented in the book? How clearly did they read?
Rose  Very. In almost every case. (Although perhaps one or two of your psychoanalysts were a bit waffly.) I think this may also be because you adopted the role of elicitor of information rather than interrogator—midwife rather than devil's advocate. The "convivial conversations", as you describe them, were not often used, indeed were not designed, as vehicles for criticism of your guest's views. The main exception is the interview with Szasz, and it is perhaps because of this that this chapter does not fit in with the rest so well.

Miller  In what way?

Rose  It dwells on the legality of psychiatric practice, without getting on to the structure of the human mind, which you were able to lead all your other contributors to talk about.

Miller  So what you are saying is that because I did not try to contradict people, or at least not very often, they were able to elaborate their ideas clearly and in a logical manner without being sidetracked.

Rose  Yes. The development of ideas comes across very well. Technical terms in psychology are explained as they arise, either in the interview or as a footnote in the book. However, there are still quite a lot of long words, hence this will not be an easy book for the layman to read—or even for many undergraduates.

I think it will be a revelation for any 'hard' scientists who read this book to see how so-called 'soft' subjects like 'mind' can be dealt with in a manner which is not waffly. Indeed, you discuss the question of whether psychology is soft, or even scientific, with a number of your contributors.

Miller  Robert Hinde, for example, suggests that the difference is merely one of complexity ...

Rose  I go along with that, but I am much more doubtful about the attempts of others to redefine science so that it fits their own conception of what they can do in their field (omitting replicability of observations, for example), or to redefine psychology so that there is one branch which is scientific and another which is nonscientific in order to justify their own work in the latter field.

Much mockery is made of extreme reductionist approaches such as Behaviourism or Desmond Morris's Manwatching, but I would like to put in a word in support of low-level approaches. Lloyd Morgan's canon advocates explanations at the lowest level of description possible, and Occam's Razor calls for simplicity. Following a simplistic line of argument to see how far it will take you is often a useful method of identifying areas where further thinking or experimentation is necessary. (Sometimes the opposite can occur and the theory explains everything, in which case it must be rejected as too general.) Even if the whole approach does turn out to be a blind alley, it may nevertheless have been a useful exercise (if only to demonstrate to future researchers and students that that whole approach is a blind alley).

Miller  But the exercise is no longer worthwhile once it becomes obvious that the approach is inadequate, as has occurred in those cases. Moreover, the influence of those theories is out of all proportion to their scientific merits.

Rose  Yes, but the same is true of psychoanalysis. In your three discussions directed specifically at this topic, Freud is pretty well torn to pieces in every detail. The only good things left that you can still say about him are that he brought the possibility of unconscious processes to the attention of the scientific community and to the world at large, and that he suggested that childhood may be important for the formation of the adult character. You did not go on to answer the problem that you posed in your introduction, as to why Freud has been so influential. The point was made—by Harré and Farrell, for example—that popular concepts, in this case psychological concepts, have influence on the way people behave. For example, if people believe in Freudianism they will behave according to the predictions of Freudian theory. The theory can then become a self-fulfilling prophesy. With Geertz, Harré, Farrell, and Szasz you discussed myths, rituals, and religion, and you covered the question of why those types of thinking can spread and persist in a society, and you sometimes drew an analogy between religious belief and Freudianism. What I missed was a final overview in which you tried to draw together these threads and perhaps come to a conclusion about the place of Freudianism in modern psychology and in modern society as a whole.
Miller A sort of general review interview about the current state of psychology? Or perhaps a prospective extrapolation about future possibilities?

Rose Yes, or a summary written by yourself. And also, one of the themes of the book is the ubiquity of hypothesis testing as a psychological process. You could have tied this in to the question of how psychoanalysts come to believe in what they are doing—do they test their theories or do they look for ‘confirming’ instances (“anticipate” the findings of the analysis, as Farrell puts it).

Miller The themes of the book are something we touched on earlier. Can I now ask you to say what you think those themes were, and comment on their exegesis.

Rose There are two themes which I particularly want to point to. The way in which they unfold as one reads through the book is fascinating. The first is the one I just mentioned—hypothesis testing. This is revealed first in perception, and the analogy is made with scientific method, by Bruner and especially by Gregory. Later, Gombrich returns to the same theme in discussing artistic skills. Even psychoanalysis uses this idea, as in Segal’s conception for fantasies as hypotheses about reality which must be tested, even if through symbolism, if we want to lead full and ‘normal’ lives. And in a sense, if we can consider expectations and models as hypotheses to be tested, then Mandler’s notion of emotion as arousal following unfulfilled expectation (ie, failed hypotheses?), and Harre’s stress on the current model of society as a necessary background against which each action must be interpreted, then both of these talks can also be considered under this umbrella.

But the second theme is one which I imagine is closer to what you had most in mind when you arranged the book. This is the structure of the mind. Following the re-establishment of such considerations, which George Miller and Bruner describe, Gregory and Dennett present arguments for the existence of unconscious mechanisms—indeed Dennett, Fodor, and Geschwind all suggest a multiplicity of such processes acting more or less independently (though with minor differences in how they see these processes being integrated into the whole system). Then in your talk with Hampshire it emerges that unconscious processes may be divided, first into preconscious and unconscious, of which only the former is directly accessible to consciousness ...

Miller A distinction first made by Freud ...

Rose Yes. And these unconscious processes which Freud postulated are different from the cognitive mechanisms used in language, perception, etc, which your previous guests had been discussing. As a final complication, Mandler then posits a division among conscious processes between our immediate ongoing awareness of our surroundings, and our fantasies, expectations, and memories. The latter have to be related to the former to avoid insanity, as Segal also suggests later.

Miller You see the book as fitting together into some sort of coherent whole, then? What I mean is, these themes are not just recurrent because everyone was talking about the same thing. Or are they?

Rose In a way. One of the attractions of the book is its eclectic composition. You not only have cognitive psychologists and philosophers of mind, but also speakers on social psychology, neurology, emotion, art, anthropology, and psychopathology. I think the book is a success because you conducted most of the interviews in a systematic and well-informed manner, so that continuities and points of cross-reference do exist. Of course there are inconsistencies of style and content, as inevitable in a work of this nature, and points with which I disagree, outside references omitted, Freud mentioned in nearly every interview (the book sometimes reads like a Festschrift for Sigmund Freud) and so on, but anyone can nitpick.

Miller You found every interview to be of some use?

Rose Not exactly, particularly Szasz’s insistence on talking about psychiatric practice—interesting, but not really integrating with the other chapters—and Segal’s exposition of Kleinian doctrine. Of the useful ones I would like to mention Dennett’s in particular as being excellent, as really getting to the most central and intractable problem, about relating mental phenomena to physical processes in the brain, and suggesting answers.
Miller  Did the eclectic nature of the book, as you put it, cover the ground adequately? Do you think it was eclectic enough?

Rose  You yourself admit in the preface that many major areas of psychology have had to be omitted through lack of opportunity. All I can add is that I would very much like to see you do another series on the same topic.

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Books received

Bower G H (Ed.) *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, Volume 16: *Advances in Research and Theory* Academic Press, New York, 1982, 286 pages, $32.50 (UK: £21.60)

Durden-Smith J, de Simone D *Sex and the Brain: The Separate Inheritance* Pan Books, Basingstoke, Hants (first published in hardback in USA by Arbor House), 1983, 253 pages, £2.50

Groner R, Menz C, Fisher D F, Monty R A (Eds) *Eye Movements and Psychological Functions: International Views* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, 1983, 354 pages, $45.00 (UK: £29.95)

Miller J (Ed.) *States of Mind: Conversations with Psychological Investigators* BBC Publications, London, 1983, 306 pages, £9.95 (US: $14.95)

Olson D R, Bialystok E *Spatial Cognition: The Structure and Development of Mental Representations of Spatial Relations* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, 1983, 277 pages, $34.50 (UK: £22.95)

Williamson S J, Romani G-L, Kaufman L, Modena I (Eds) *Biomagnetism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* NATO ASI Series A, Volume 66, Plenum, New York, 1983, 706 pages, $95.00 (20% higher outside USA and Canada)

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