Individual Psychological Deficits

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Traditional psychological theories fail to take into account individual psychological deficits and thus make false conclusions regarding sanity and insanity. These deficits include perception, experience, cognition, and affect. Modified definitions of sanity and insanity require different approaches to treatment of psychological issues.

The conclusions of psychological theories will be false if they are built on false premises. To change false conclusions of psychological theories, we must change the false premises.

Some psychological theories define “sane” human beings as psychologically independent or complete (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Beck & Freeman and Associates, 1990; Ellis & Harper, 1997). On the other hand, they define “insane” human beings as those who are psychologically dependent or incomplete (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Beck, et. al., 1990; Ellis & Harper, 1997). Does this make young children, who are dependent on adults, “insane,” or are they special cases that do not fit the theories?

Other psychological theories define sane human beings as social, but define insane human beings as those who have difficulty forming healthy and meaningful relationships (Erikson, 1956; Fromm, 1990). However, what if two people with the same insanity enjoy a meaningful relationship? For example, would the notorious gangsters, Bonnie and Clyde, be considered sane?

Human beings are born with psychological deficits. In other words, all of us would be described as having elements of insanity by most psychological theories. Sanity, according to most psychological theories, actually becomes an unattainable perfection.

A more accurate definition of sanity is the acceptance of our individual psychological deficits, the healthy doubting of our perceptions of reality, and the reliance on others who likewise accept their deficits. Conversely, insanity would be the denial of our individual psychological deficits, the healthy doubting of our perceptions of reality, and the reliance on others who likewise accept their deficits, and substituting instead the taking for granted that our experiences of reality are infallible, while rejecting all other views.

This paper will divide individual psychological deficits into organic and inorganic, as organic may be easier to understand. Organic deficits will be divided into biological and perceptual elements to explain how both may contribute to false perceptions of reality. The elements of organic deficits will be used to investigate inorganic deficits. An example of how a model of individual psychological deficits modifies conclusions of experiential phenomena will be given. How individual psychological deficits affect experiences of reality, including cognition, affect, relationships, communication, and collaboration, will be discussed. Finally, existentialism will be critiqued.

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Organic Deficits

Psychology is an intangible compound of which some elements are tangible and others intangible. Among the tangible elements of psychology is biology, or the organic. Among the intangible is perception. Individual psychological deficits may be difficult to understand because they are intangible. Individual biological deficits are simpler to understand because they are tangible. Examining individual biological deficits may help us understand individual psychological deficits more easily.

One individual biological deficit is two-dimensional vision, or "mono-vision." "Mono-" is from the Greek, meaning "alone." Once, a friend who lost an eye wanted me to experience seeing in two dimensions. He instructed me to cover an eye with my hand and attempt to catch a ball with the other hand. He tossed the ball to me several times. Sometimes I caught the ball, but most of the time, I missed it.

Because our eyes are slightly apart, they look at objects from two separate angles. Our brain combines the images from each eye into a three-dimensional picture. Seeing in three-dimensions is so natural that we hardly think about it.

My friend explained that he experienced three-dimensional sight in two ways. First, he could move back and forth while keeping his eye on the same object. Second, he could rely on previously experienced information. For example, if the front of a table looked bigger than the back, he could correctly assume that the table was square.

Another individual biological deficit is "mono-phonics." During high school classes, I listened to music. To conceal my listening from the teacher, I used a single earphone, with the wire wrapped behind my ear and tucked into my shirt collar. My enjoyment of the music was less than usual because I could only hear it with one of my ears.

I noticed that my stereo at home had two settings, "Mono" and "Stereo." Stereo meant that two speakers played the same music. My ears heard both speakers and my brain combined the two sounds into one common experience, enhancing the effect.

In short, my visual and audio biological deficits changed my perception of reality in ways that could be deceptive if I did not understand my deficits and overcome them.

Inorganic Deficits

Individual psychological deficits may be more difficult to understand than individual biological deficits because they are intangible. However, they are no less real. One inorganic biological deficit is "mono-perception."

Pretend that I was walking out of a bank, while you were across the street, opposite of me. Suddenly, a person with a gun, a mask, and a bag runs out of the bank and jumps into a car, which speeds away. The police arrive minutes later and interview both of us. Our perceptions of the same incident would be completely different because: 1) We had different vantage points, and 2) We had unique experiences.

My brother, who studied Criminal Justice, told me about "collaboration." When police question two witnesses to an incident and both have the exact same story, the police assume that collaboration has occurred, especially if the people were at different vantage points. This is because witnesses naturally view the same event differently.

Our legal system requires two witnesses to establish a fact. One witness is fallible due to individual perceptual deficits. What one person witnessed may be a hallucination. However, if two people witnessed the same event, legally it is a fact.

Our legal system is based on Biblical law. According to the ancient Apostle Paul, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established" (2 Corinthians 13:1). Thus, if one prophet claims to have seen an angel, people may have a tendency to disregard it as a hallucination; however, if two prophets claim to have seen the same angel, it cannot be dismissed so easily.

Asch Study

A famous psychological study by Solomon Asch (1958) arranged a group of actors at a table with a subject at one end. A conductor showed the actors and subject three lines on a paper. The conductor then asked each actor in turn, which line was the shortest. The actors gave prearranged answers. The conductor then asked the subject in turn, which line was the shortest. The subject usually went along with what the actors said. Only a few of the subjects went against the collusions of the actors. When these subjects were questioned further, they became even more adamant that they were correct. The study concluded that most subjects gave answers against their perceptions due to social pressure.

My modified explanation of the study is that the subjects went along with the actors not due to social pressure, but due to acceptance of the fallibility of their individual perceptions. Rather than insist that they were
right and everyone else was wrong, they chose to give the others the benefit of the doubt. They knew that their eyes could “play tricks on them,” even if it didn’t happen very often. In other words, they had a healthy doubt of their limitations, which was sane.

Conversely, the subjects that insisted they were right may have resisted social pressure, but they also preferred their own perceptions over the perceptions of a group of other people. Their subjective preferences did not take into account that their senses may be wrong. In other words, they had an unhealthy assumption of infallibility, which, taken to extremes, could be considered insane.

**Experience**

Even when perception is identical, or at least similar, people can have completely different experiences in reaction to what was perceived. The question, “How did you like the show?” can illustrate this phenomenon. Theaters go to great expense to give everyone in the audience as similar perceptions as possible.

Have you ever been to the theater with a friend who praised the acting, singing, or dancing, while you criticized it? Even though your perceptions of the show were similar, you had completely different reactions. Perhaps you, as opposed to your friend, have a history of studying performance arts and could detect subtle flaws that your friend could not. Perhaps an objectionable part of the show tainted your view of the whole. Whatever the reason, your experience does not invalidate your friend’s or vice-versa.

**Cognition**

A phenomenon present in young children is egocentrism (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). The young child assumes that you perceive reality identically with how the young child perceives reality. For example, if the young child looks at a picture in a book, the young child will assume that you can see the same picture the young child sees, even if you are facing the book’s cover. Another example is the young child with eyes closed that says, “You can’t see me.”

What I term “mono-cognition” or “mono-thought” is cognitive egocentrism, or assuming that everyone thinks the way you do. A person with mono-thought is surprised and threatened when others disagree with the person’s opinions. The person often feels frustrated that others don’t think the same way as the person. The person says in disbelief, “How can they think that way!?” The person with mono-thought fails to realize that the person’s thoughts, as well as every other person’s thoughts, are vulnerable to individual cognitive deficits.

Narcissism is mono-cognition taken to the extreme. The person with narcissism has such egocentricity of thought that the person overlooks all points of view but the person’s. The person assumes that your needs are not important enough to consider.

Likewise, a person with Antisocial Personality Disorder (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, pp. 649-650) has extreme mono-cognition. This person fails to understand any thoughts but this person’s own thoughts. This person cannot feel your pain and so doesn’t comprehend that you can experience pain. Likewise, this person cannot understand your empathy for others.

**Affect**

Like individual cognitive deficits, people have inborn individual emotional deficits. We may measure our emotions based on the emotions of others. If we base our emotions solely on past experiences, we may realize that all of our experiences were partially based on our reactions to others.

Traditional psychological theories claim that children form emotional attachments to adults but become more emotionally independent as they grow (Erikson, 1956; Fromm, 1990). However, I assert that human beings do not become emotionally independent. We begin as children with emotional dependency on caretakers. We grow into teenagers and gradually switch our emotional dependency from caretakers to peers. We become adults and base our emotional dependency on other adults. We become caretakers and continue the cycle.

Anxiety develops when people do not have sufficient attachments to validate their feelings. A lack of adequate emotional attachments may also result in depression.

Developmental Disorders, such as Autistic Disorder and Reactive Attachment Disorder, are forms of mono-affect. The child with autism may not be able to form a healthy attachment to others. The child with reactive attachment has difficulty forming a healthy attachment to caretaking adults.

Codependency traditionally describes being emotionally
dependent as making one vulnerable to abuse (Beattie, 1992). I assert that the unhealthy nature of codependency is not in the emotional dependence, but in the object of that dependence. For example, a person who attaches emotionally to an abuser will never receive emotional invalidation.

“Crazymaking” (Bach & Deutsch, 1980) describes the phenomenon in which abusers influence emotionally dependent victims to doubt personal perceptions of reality, resulting in more dependence on the perceptions of others. The victims often experience conflicts between their own senses and abusers’ perceptions of incidents, resulting in thoughts that they may be “insane.” Ironically, the victims that allow for their own limitations exhibit more sanity than the abusers that never question their perceptions.

Traditional treatments of the person with codependency may include changing the person from being emotionally dependent to being emotionally independent. People with codependency may resist this treatment or become non-compliant, preferring an unhealthy relationship to no relationship. A more effective approach to treatment may be to accept the emotional dependency as normal and instead validate the victim’s perceptions until the victim finds healthier relationships to replace the abusive one. The effective treatment emphasis may not be on independence, but on relational equality.

**Relationships**

Your first meaningful relationship was most likely with your parent. As you grew to adulthood, you probably formed relationships with peers. As an adult, you may have married. These relationships may be sufficient for you to perceive and internalize reality. If not, you may have sought therapy to make up for what you missed from family and friends. You may have had children and were able to provide the needed relationship for them to grow into healthy adults.

When a parent disciplines a child, the child may dismiss the disciplining as nonessential; however, when the parent is backed up by another parent, extended family member, or adult friend, the child is more likely to accept the discipline as valid. Additionally, if the parent disciplines too harshly, the supporter may moderate the parent. If the parent becomes too emotional to deal with the child, the supporter may step in until the parent calms down. Furthermore, a child can manipulate the parent more easily when the parent does not have the help of a supportive adult.

In short, relationships may be the best way to overcome our individual psychological deficits. Without meaningful relationships, we have no one to correct our misperceptions, misinterpretations of experience, and misunderstandings of reality. With meaningful relationships, we can compare and contrast our perceptions with the perceptions of another, reinterpret our difficult experiences, and arrive at conclusions about reality which we may never have considered alone. In fact, our reliance on meaningful relationships to overcome our individual psychological deficits may be so encompassing that we may take it for granted.

**Communication**

Once, a friend told me that she was frustrated because one of her employees could not understand exactly what she was saying, no matter how clearly she spoke to the employee. My friend said, “I tell her [the employee] what to do in a way that it is impossible for her to misunderstand, and she still doesn’t get it!”

I warned my friend that she was operating from a false premise; that no matter how clearly she spoke, her employee could always misunderstand her communications due to the fallibility of perception. I further told my friend that her assumption that her employee could not misunderstand her might be exactly what was undermining her employee’s ability to understand.

In short, meaningful relationships may not help us overcome our individual psychological deficits if we do not communicate effectively.

**Collaboration**

You may have heard the saying, “Two heads are better than one.” When we collaborate with another person, we move from subjectivity to objectivity. This may be what Aaron Beck (1979) calls the “collaborative empiricism” between a therapist and client.

What is true of cognition and affect is true of perception and experience. Through collaboration, we rise above our own perceptions and experiences,
balancing them with the perceptions and experiences of others. Collaboration is essential to grasp reality.

Reality-testing is a phenomenon associated with individuals with psychoses. An individual with psychoses may suddenly stop and ask, "Did you hear that?" If you say, "Yes," the individual may be relieved. If you say, "Hear what?" the individual may be worried. The individual with psychoses is relying on your perception of reality to validate or invalidate that individual's perception.

However, individuals without psychoses constantly test reality in other ways. If we are unsure about ideas, we "bounce" them off others, or use others as a "sounding board." If we are unsure about feelings, we seek validation. Students may find that they can study better in groups. Musicians may find that they can play music more precisely with others than they can by themselves.

If two heads are better than one, so are two hearts. One heart may feel passion, but what good would that be if it is not reciprocated? Passion must be shared to be beneficial. This is the psychology of love. As Erich Fromm (1956) stated, "Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence."

Existentialism

Existential psychology claims that the individual ultimately cannot depend on anyone for help, including therapists, family, or friends (Yalom, 1980). Ironically, existential therapists hope that others depend upon them for help to come to that conclusion! This is reminiscent of the true existential philosopher who believes himself alone in the Universe. According to Irving Yalom (1980), "One is isolated not only from other beings but, to the extent that one constitutes one's world, from world as well" (p. 10).

The last book written by Mark Twain, The Mysterious Stranger (1916), describes a man who discovers that everything around him is an illusion and that he is the only reality in the Universe. The man realizes that he created the illusions of other people with whom to interact and form relationships. One of these illusionary people, a stranger, is the part of his mind that helps him rediscover his solitary existence.

Conclusion

Unlike the man in The Mysterious Stranger, we do not live in a vacuum. We are part of a Universe filled with fellow human beings. We cannot dismiss others as unimportant or unhelpful. We cannot remain solitary, aloof, or independent of others. We are dependent on others for the abilities to perceive, experience, think about, and feel reality. Furthermore, the more we depend on others, balancing their own perceptions, experiences, thoughts, and feelings with our own, the healthier and saner we will be.

References


