

What really matters ...

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

Why do young people study psychology? Together with medicine and law, psychology has been one of the most popular studies for years in the Netherlands. Unlike for example medicine, many students drop out during the first year. Why? I still remember the great disappointment of fellow students around me. A lot of research facts that seem completely insignificant outside the context of the research or experiment, and a lot of statistical education, in order to "massage" the data in the expected or desired direction. This was about "everyone in general", but rarely if ever about "someone in particular", while the latter was precisely the reason that interested students made their choice. Their interest was aroused by literature, or by their own emotions and cognitions. The students come in "as sponges", to be overloaded and saturated with a lot of little or inconsistent research facts.

Now, more than 30 years later, I still regularly hear from our first and sometimes second-year students that they had completely different expectations of the study of psychology. Especially my course - brain and technology - is often far removed from expectations. Every now and then I start the conversation with one or a few of the disappointed. What did they expect, what do they want to know?

Is there a soul? Are body and soul separate entities? Is there life after death? In the following discussions, invariably at a certain point my answer is that psychology is a science - whose native language should be maths - and that a scientific hypothesis must be verifiable and falsifiable. The hypothesis that there is immaterial life can neither be verified nor falsified. "But", my students argue, "this also applies to the hypothesis that there is nothing after death" (neither scientifically verifiable nor falsifiable).

But this year I had a very good student, who asked: "Dividing by 0 is nonsense, right?" Indeed, not scientific is not divisible into more or lesser scientific. The "economical" (nihilistic) version - There is nothing after death - is no more scientific than the (imaginative) heaven-and-hell version. "Not" divided by "not" is non-existent! I must admit. I even go further, by stating that if people say that the only certainty of the living is that they die, they can't even be really sure. It's just an induction: because I only see black and white swans, I induce that swans are white or black. If a canary yellow variant is suddenly spotted, this "knowledge" can be replaced for a more accurate version. Perhaps there are people, or other organisms, who never died (like the Highlanders in the movie). While I continue my argument on deduction - certain knowledge - and induction (temporary knowledge), I see my students lose interest. This may fascinate me, but perhaps I have become too "addicted" to the scientific method of knowledge acquisition.

I ask my students what fascinates them. "Psychological films, literature, why some music moves you to tears while other music literally drives you to move," they answer. "Sometimes psychology in art, or even on the street seems so much more appealing and profound than what we learn at the academy", they continue. "We learn to describe someone with psychological tests scores: IQ 95, introvert personality, problem avoiding coping style, etc. It looks like a painting consisting of a few spots that have to represent a person. We want to learn to paint a human being, as writers and poets sometimes do, to the essence".

Actually, I understand what they mean. I conclude they want a psychology written in art, beside the mathematical psychology I teach. They agree, psychology could well be considered as both science and art. To Freud, psychology was also bound to stories, literature, antiquity, philosophy. But also to medicine. Even artists live in the physical reality, which can't be escaped. And psychologists do not want their praxis to look like those of quack and prayer healers. Together with my students we state the question: what have we really reached after more than a century of scientific psychology? The artificial intelligence has had its cradle in cognitive psychology, and many other practical applications have arisen (such as programming languages, music sequence programs, speech recognition). For example, the inventor of Siri, Tom Gruber, is a psychologist. However, these applications have come to fruition on their own, often far away from scientific psychology. In art, every new generation is allowed to redefine its object, what really matters. Would it not be possible to give the new generation of students and future psychologists the opportunity to define their own objectives? In addition to scientific based psychology a more art-oriented psychology could also emerge and flourish. The interaction between the two may offer unprecedented possibilities!