

Explaining and Understanding in Psychopathology

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Psychoanalytical methodology has been described as causal explanation or hermeneutic understanding. This methodological dichotomy has been introduced into psychopathology by Karl Jaspers. Contemporary authors' contributions in the area are discussed. Although these authors accept a role for both methods, they agree with Jaspers that psychoanalysis should be subjected to the logical limitations of hermeneutic analysis. A logical framework for the interaction of explaining with understanding is presented and discussed in relation to psychiatric research.

In a recent critical analysis, Gellner (1985) suggested that a "biohermeneutic fusion" of concepts – that is, the conflation of meaningful and causal connections (see below) – has helped psychoanalysis to assert and maintain its role as a healing discipline. Understanding meaningful connections by itself, he argues, is not sufficient to capture the imagination of the sufferers. After all, meanings can be found without professional help. A purely biological theory, on the other hand, demeans man by reducing him to a "bundle of animal drives". Mixing both elements gives meanings increased depth and authority (by virtue of being linked to biological forces) and helps patients to retain their dignity in the face of biological determinism (thanks to the meaning which has to be analysed on a personal level). Thus, "bio-hermeneutics is simultaneously reductive (thereby giving control) and restorative (dignity-preserving)" (Gellner, 1985).

The interplay of causes and meanings, or explaining and understanding, in psychoanalysis has been noted earlier: the first discussion of psychoanalytic methodology under these headings was carried out by Karl Jaspers in his *General Psychopathology* (Jaspers, 1963).

This paper will examine some of the limitations of explaining and understanding, as conceived by Jaspers, as methods of psychopathological investigation. Contemporary definitions of psychoanalysis as a discipline which uses both explaining *and* understanding will be discussed in an attempt to define the methodological constraints imposed upon psychoanalytic theory and practice. A logical framework for the interaction of both methods in psychopathology will be proposed.

Jaspers: Psychoanalysis is an hermeneutic discipline mistaking itself for a causal science

Jaspers' concept of *causal analysis* is derived from Hume's (1962) regularity model of causality: the

discovery of regular temporal conjunctions between two kinds of events leads to the postulation of a general law, which *explains* this conjunction. The general law, in turn, can be used to predict future conjunctions of events of the same kind.

Empathic understanding is a method modelled by Jaspers on the hermeneutic disciplines, philology and history. *Hermeneutics* (literally, the art of interpretation) always starts with a preliminary understanding. A facial expression with closed eyes and tears rolling down the cheeks is recognised as crying. This momentary facial expression, however, can have many, sometimes contradictory, meanings. It makes a difference whether someone has just received news of the death of a close relative, has been told a joke, or has been peeling onions; an examination of the context of the expression is necessary to define it more precisely. Knowing that a patient has a hysterical personality shows the crying in a different light than would the detection of organic brain disease, like pseudo-bulbar palsy. Conversely, the context is modified by appreciation of the detail. For example, crocodile tears which can be wiped away as soon as their purpose is achieved might point towards a particular kind of personality.

Hermeneutic analysis, therefore, follows a movement rather like ascending a spiral staircase. The preliminary understanding is modified by a successive appreciation and reappreciation of details and context. If new observational material is gathered at each stage, an infertile circle is avoided, and more and more precise understanding can be achieved. This procession from the part to the whole and back can never be complete. Understanding can, therefore, never be final. Consequently, contrary interpretations are often equally plausible. One can understand how a handicap could lead to withdrawal from competition, but one can equally understand that a handicapped person might try to make up for disadvantages by developing his remaining capabilities and skills

even to the degree of surpassing his healthy peers. Although meaningful connections can be found in the analysis of human expressions and artifacts, understanding has its limits: one cannot *understand* empathically why a patient with pseudo-bulbar palsy cries or laughs. The finding that other patients with similar brain lesions show the same behaviour, offers a causal *explanation*.

It follows that both explaining and understanding are applicable in the human sciences. Where understanding ends, explanations are still possible, and where understanding is possible using objective data this might point towards a causal connection. In order to establish a causal law, however, external data will have to be adduced to avoid circular arguments. Violent behaviour cannot be explained in terms of an explosive personality if this personality is diagnosed by the observation of just this violent behaviour. An observation external to the process of understanding is necessary for a causal explanation, as for example the detection of EEG abnormalities in this kind of personality disorder (Williams, 1969).

Understanding by means of conjectured mechanisms like the ego, the unconscious, or libido, is, in Jaspers' terminology, 'as if' understanding. These mechanisms have to be postulated in order to explain non-understandable observations like conversion symptoms or dissociative states. They lack, however, externality and independence from the process of empathic understanding and, therefore, lead to circular rather than causal statements (Nagel, 1959). Jaspers comes to the conclusion that psychoanalysis is an understanding psychology, which frequently uses 'as if' understanding, but is presented by Freud as a causal science similar to the natural sciences.

Explaining and understanding in contemporary descriptions of psychoanalysis

More recently, psychoanalysis has been described as either a causal science (Hartmann, 1964; Rubinstein, 1973) or as a hermeneutic discipline (Rycroft, 1966; Lacan, 1977). Other authors have commented on the interaction between explaining and understanding in psychoanalytic theory and practice. Three of the latter, Ricoeur, Habermas, and Bhaskar, will now be discussed in more detail.

Jaspers argued for a total disjunction between causal and meaningful connections in psychopathology (Jaspers, 1963), which led to his definition of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic discipline. Ricoeur's refusal to accept this disjunction becomes the basis of his interpretation of Freudian theory (Ricoeur, 1970). He identifies two elements in

Freudian theory: libido theory, which uses dynamic explanations, modelled on a physical theory of hydraulics; and the interpretation of dreams, parapraxes, and the like. Ricoeur's central question is how a dynamic explanation can be involved in an interpretation dealing with meanings, and conversely, how an interpretation can be an aspect of a dynamic explanation. If psychoanalysis was made an operational science like academic psychology, it would lose its distinctive character as an interpretative enterprise dealing with the symbolic relationships between substitute objects and the primordial (and lost) instinctual objects. On the other hand, the understanding of human motives alone is unable to account for Freudian concepts like cathexis, where the language of intention and meaning is replaced by energy metaphors. A distortion between literal and intended meaning evokes mechanisms like dreamwork, displacement and condensation. Jaspers' verdict that these mechanisms only promote 'as if' understanding is judged to be too harsh, because their reality is deducible from the manifestation of object relations, which reappear and can be examined in the transference relationship.

The weakness of Ricoeur's argument lies in his acceptance of Freud's dynamic mechanisms. Even if one accepted that these mechanisms correctly took over where empathic understanding was at an end, and that they were providing a plausible and coherent explanation of the observed phenomena, Jaspers' criticism of 'as if' understanding still holds. Psychodynamic mechanisms, as long as they are only based on the *failure to understand* a patient's behaviour by examining all overt clues, are circular and fanciful constructs. In order to become valid explanatory constructs they must be identifiable independently of the psychotherapeutic dialogue (Nagel, 1959).

Habermas, a contemporary representative of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, has developed a theory of knowledge in which psychoanalysis occupies a special place (Habermas, 1978). He acknowledges the difference in methods between causal sciences and hermeneutic disciplines, but gives it a novel meaning. Categories like space, time, substance, and causality are, according to Kant (1931), implied with the perception of any object, independently of its particular impression on our senses. In a similar fashion Habermas postulates constitutive interests in knowledge which underlie scientific activities. He recognises a technical interest to manipulate and predict the environment. Its method is causal analysis, and its field, the natural sciences. Similarly, the interest of interpersonal communication underlies the understanding of meaningful connections in the human sciences. Habermas criticises the

extension of the technical interest into the human sciences: sociology and psychology, whenever they try to establish laws in order to predict human behaviour, introduce an unjustified sense of necessity. They tend to maintain the status quo, and can act as 'false consciousness' or ideology that prevents the emancipation of human beings or groups.

Habermas takes Freud's statement, "where there was Id, there shall be Ego", and defines the task of psychoanalysis as the shifting of the barrier between explaining and understanding by self-reflection. Seemingly unavoidable acts like compulsions or conversion symptoms are brought back into the realm of intentional, freely willed actions by the uncovering of their meaning. Habermas, indeed, suggests that the understandability of seemingly causal connections points towards the possibility of emancipation from their false power.

Habermas' theory relies on a cognitive account of psychoanalysis. It hinges on the questionable efficacy of insight in bringing about the emancipation from symptoms. Similarly, Habermas' strict insistence on a division between the methods for the natural and the human sciences is open to criticism: it implies a division of the world into a natural world subjected to causal necessity and human sphere where causal constraints on free will and agency can only be temporary (Keat, 1981). It would go beyond the limitations of this paper to give a discussion of determinacy and free will; suffice it to say that without the causal efficacy of human motives or decisions on their implied acts, free will could never express itself (Bhaskar, 1979).

Another author who examines the link between explaining and understanding in the human sciences is Bhaskar (1979). His realist theory of science rejects the Humean regularity model of causality. Regularities, according to Bhaskar, can only be observed in controlled experiments in closed systems. In particular, falsification as a criterion for the rejection of hypotheses cannot be used in open systems, since the constellation of frame-conditions only allows for the expression of causal mechanisms on special occasions. This observation leads Bhaskar to base his theory of science on the assumption that causal generative mechanisms are really existing in the world around us. Since falsification cannot be a criterion for rejecting their existence, they cannot necessarily be used for predicting events.

Bhaskar's theory of knowledge (Bhaskar, 1975) has been applied to psychoanalysis and psychiatry by Will (1980, 1983, 1984). Will's conclusion for the methodology of these disciplines is that the search for explanations with the help of generative mechanisms makes hermeneutic approaches unnecessary and undesirable.

Bhaskar himself seems to suggest otherwise (Bhaskar, 1979). He argues that the natural sciences arrive at the knowledge of generative mechanisms through their direct observation or the observation of their effects, as in the case of electrical or gravitational fields. The human sciences need a hermeneutic approach for the *definition* of their generative mechanisms. The differentiation of, for instance, causally effective reasons from mere rationalisations, or lies, is possible by comparing the stated reason with its context; that is, the situational and personal circumstances. Naturally, the statement of a reason by itself might change our appreciation of somebody's personality – we encounter here, again, the hermeneutic circle. Bhaskar thus accepts understanding as a legitimate method for arriving at generative mechanisms in the human sciences. He fails to discuss, however, the logical relationship between hermeneutics and the testing of hypotheses.

A logical framework of the interaction between understanding and explaining

The strength of causal analysis is most obvious where predictions can be made, or where technical control of the environment can be achieved. The logical structure of explanations has been examined by Hempel & Oppenheim (1948); both Nagel (1959) and Popper (1969) have described criteria of adequacy for explanations in general, and for psychoanalysis in particular. Stockman (1983) has delineated the controversies between realist and Popperian approaches to causal explanations, and has suggested that these are at present not decidable (Stockman, 1985).

According to Jaspers (1963), understanding derives its validity from two sources. On the data side, *objectively observable behaviour* or artifacts like letters, drawings and the like can be analysed by several examiners. Their understanding of the data within their context can be compared. Jaspers calls the understanding of objective data interpretation, a choice of terminology which is compatible with everyday language.

Understanding, as long as it is based on objectively observable data, requires, in addition, the experience of plausibility in the observer. This experience of plausibility, or *evidency* in Jaspers' terminology, does not depend on concurrent empirical validation. It is plausible, for example, that someone who has been disappointed in relationships might consequently be suspicious about the motives of others. Where does this experience of plausibility or evidency come from? A necessary condition for the possibility of

understanding is that human beings can empathise with each other. There are several levels on which this can be illustrated. As social beings humans use an array of inborn gestures and expressive utterances. For example, the ability to laugh and cry is retained in congenitally deaf and blind people, and these expressions are understandable independently from cultural background and personal experience. A shared physical and social environment facilitates understanding, but even foreign cultures can be understood by learning the rules of their language and their social institutions (Malinowski, 1922). Since the rules linking code signs to coded message are arbitrary (Saussure, 1974), the breaking of a code consists of an attempt to unravel internally the meanings of signs, relating them reciprocally to the whole message. Wherever human cultures have created systems of signs or symbols, the hermeneutic method will, therefore, be the appropriate method of analysis.

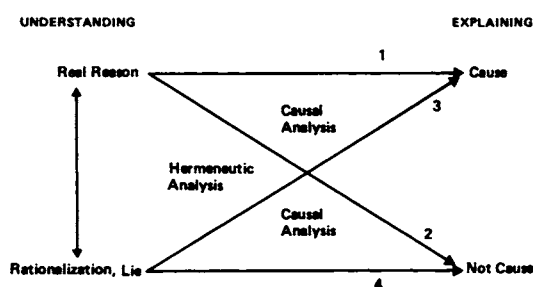


FIG. 1 The logical relationship between explaining and understanding.

Figure 1 shows a possible model for the interaction between explaining and understanding. Most theorists agree that causal explanations, before they become established, have to go through a stage of being tested as hypotheses. How hypotheses are arrived at in the first place often remains obscure. A common approach in psychopathology is to start with understandable connections, to make their components operational, and to test them in order to arrive at a correlation and, hopefully, a causal connection. It is understandable, for example, that a single mother without support and with many children to look after might easily slip into a depressive state after a serious loss, particularly if she has been sensitised to loss by a previous important bereavement, or if her mother, the traditional source of help, is not available (Young & Willmott, 1962; Brown & Harris, 1978). This understandable connection can be transformed into a hypothesis to be tested by empirical means (Fig. 1, arrow 1). It is essential to differentiate between the claim for truth of the

understandable connection and that of the causal hypothesis. The former depends mainly on the psychological plausibility of depression developing from loss under certain circumstances. The latter hinges on the statistical persuasiveness of empirical results.

It is conceivable, in contrast, that an understandable connection, for instance between the loss of an organ and depression, is not borne out in causal analysis (Fig. 1, arrow 2). Although a causal relationship is not confirmed by the empirical data, a particular case can still be legitimately understood, if the connection is psychologically plausible. Although hysterectomy might not lead to an increased incidence of depression (Gath & Day, 1982), a case of depression after hysterectomy can still be understood on the basis of this connection.

Researchers are less likely to derive hypotheses from plainly disingenuous reasons (Fig. 1, arrows 3 and 4). A case could easily be construed, however, of a patient with occult carcinoma of the pancreas who claimed that he was depressed *because* he was terminally ill. Empirical testing of this psychologically clearly absurd hypothesis (which might have been classified as a nihilistic delusion by the clinical observer) could, however, lead to a medical and statistical confirmation (Fras *et al*, 1967; Fig. 1, arrow 3). Similar examples could theoretically be adduced for implausible rationalisations which prove to be empirically false if adopted as hypotheses (Fig. 1, arrow 4).

If the decision whether some factor is causally relevant or not lies with the empirical testing of hypotheses and is logically independent from the psychological plausibility of the postulated connection, it could be argued that the understanding of meaningful connections has nothing to contribute as a method of enquiry to the final outcome of scientific investigation (Will, 1983). At best it provides a heuristic tool for the formation of hypotheses. As long as no technological paradigms are being exploited, like imaging techniques or hormone assays, scientific investigation in psychiatry will naturally fall back on understandable connections for the production of causal hypotheses. In addition, the hermeneutic method has remained a part of diagnostic instruments in clinical research, like the PSE (Wing *et al*, 1984), which continually requires the examiner to decide whether symptoms or distress exceed the degree understandable from the patient's actual experiences and background. Here, and even more in clinical psychiatric practice, a wholly objective, operational system of diagnosis and assessment, although conceivable, has not yet been achieved.

Understandable connections can immunise the corresponding causal hypotheses against rejections (Kuhn, 1962). It is plausible, for instance, that

middle-class psychiatrists find it easier to empathise with patients of their own class and, therefore, are less likely to classify their beliefs as delusional and to make a diagnosis of schizophrenia than with working-class patients. With seemingly supportive empirical results (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958), a labelling theory of schizophrenia was quickly established. It needed much clinical awareness and research stamina to reject this theory (Goldberg & Morrison, 1963). Even the pseudo-plausibility of psychoanalytic 'as if' understanding was able to sustain, for example, the idea of schizophrenogenic mothers (Fromm-Reichmann, 1948) against mounting empirical evidence, an idea which was only disbanded after a considerable research effort (Leff, 1985).

Because of the central role understanding plays in psychiatry, it has to be recognised when it occurs. Its inner logic and limitations have to be appreciated, so that no unjustified claims are made (Storr, 1983). There is a moral obligation to use and improve understanding both in medicine and in human relations in general. The failure to do so is amply and painfully documented in the abuse of medicine and psychiatry under authoritarian regimes. Since both instrumental intelligence and empathy have survival value for a species, it can only be hoped that man's ability to find working explanations which lead to advanced technology is matched and tempered by his ability to empathise with others' way of thinking and feeling. In order to avoid pseudo-scientific claims, however, the fusion of biological and hermeneutic concepts, to use Gellner's terms, should be recognised and rejected.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help of Dr J. A. O. Besson, Dr F. Corrigan, Professor A. C. P. Sims, Dr N. Stockman, my wife Linda and Miss S. McLeod.

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