Chapter 9
Conclusion: From Experimental to Experiential Psychology

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The experimental method is the cornerstone of psychology as a science. So we are told—over the past century in various disguises—by various experts and deep believers in the promise that psychology will one day become a "real" science. The label *method* is supposed to add credibility to what psychologists do, and the constant parallels made with the dependence of physics on experiments set the stage for playing the game of experimenter being in control of all the "variables" selected for inspection in a given study.

Yet there is a small feature of psychological experimentation that sets it drastically apart from the analogues with physics or chemistry—the phenomena studied in the latter *do not interpret what is going on with them* in an experiment. Human beings do. And even more fundamentally, their interpretation leads to change in their actions in the experimental context and their resistance to some "stimuli," the "effects" of which are supposedly being studied. The task that is initially given can shift in the process of the participation (as described in Chaps. 5 and 7 of this volume). Likewise, the motivation of the participant can change over the course of the experiment. The cherished notion of "control" by the experimenter is made indeterminate by the counter-active roles of the participants.

Thus, the experimental method is not a "standard conveyer belt" of testing cause-effect relations, but a theatrical encounter of different active persons—the experimenter (who pretends to "control" the situation) and the "research participant"[1]

[1] Note the historical changes in the labeling of these actors in the experimental situation (Bibace et al., 2009). First, they were called *observers*—as the experiments used introspective techniques. Then, they were called *Versuchsperson* in the German areas and *subjects* in English. Finally, by the twenty-first century, they are *research participants* who sign forms of giving up their rights of ownership of the data they produce for the anonymization of their person and the place. Note that the organizer of the study—the experimenter—is *not* considered to belong to the category of *participants*—even as her role in setting up an experiment is clear key participation. By that exclusion it becomes possible to remain uninformed of what actually happens in the experiment.

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(who is supposed to follow the instructions but whose generosity toward the experimenter actually lets the control illusion of the experimenter to thrive). The experimenter is the analogue of a theatre director who sets up the play, but does not play any part in it. As the director, she is completely dependent on the collaboration of the actors whose motivation to follow the given instruction may be lured by a small payment, a lottery with the chance to win some intermediate valued award, or getting points in the system of participants' pool.

This contrast—experiment as an administrative act which is fully under control of the director (experimenter), in contrast with the theatrical view where the role of the experimenter (theatre director) remains central, but her control is limited by the counter-actions of the participants, as well as of audience[2]—is worth further investigation as a culturally constructed and maintained social encounter. Its by-product can be new knowledge, yet its immediate significance of "research being conducted" or "experiment in progress" belongs to the category of societal rituals.

Experiment as an Administrative Act

Psychology over the twentieth century has managed to overlook the agentive roles of human beings in their lives and subsequently treated them as willing participants—once they have signed their "consent forms"—in various experiments set up under the models of basic sciences. Hence it has been relatively easy to present the experiment as a regular administrative act where the obedient citizens diligently and honestly carry out the instructions given by the administrator (Fig. 9.1) resulting in the production of the desired outcome (valid data).

Figure 9.1 provides a simple illustration—the experimenter (administrator) sets up the task and gives instructions, and the participant proceeds to perform the task, with the results duly collected and further analyzed. The act of performing the task is seen as that of benevolent obedience—it is assumed that the consenting participant is aligned with the administrator to achieve the results set up by expectations of the task. Even if there is a task shift in the middle of the performance, it is part of the commands coming from the administrator—the participant is tested as to her adaptation to that, rather than expected to introduce an uncontrollable personal take on the task (e.g., "I am tired of this boring task" or "I really do not like how the administrator treats me"). These acts of personal clandestine disobedience are not supposed to play any role in the experiment as the pure temple of science. They are either overlooked—easy to do as long as these personal constructs remain clandestine—or the given experimental session is trashed as a failure. The science of psychology over the past two centuries has been a science of obedient minds—while in the wider societies, these very same minds have been actively involved in divorces,

[2] The audience here is the readership of the published experimental results that judge these results through the culturally set prisms of societal relevance or through the sieve of moral responsibility.

Fig. 9.1 Traditional view of the experiment: controlling obedient participants

protests, revolutions, wars, and purposive efforts to resist structures, become rich, or live happily ever after.

Experiment as Theatre

We propose that the encounter of researchers with the researchees we call "experiment" belongs to the class of non-public theatre productions. The non-public nature of these productions is supposed to enhance their social prestige—as an event taking place behind the closed door of an ordinary room with the label "Laboratory of X" on the door. Thus, the experiment becomes a genre of theatrical productions in psychology, among others[3] (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Secord, 1972). Figure 9.2 illustrates the theatrical structure of the experiment. The experimenter here is the theatre director who sets up the whole performance that entails not only creating the task (script) but also finding appropriate actors to carry out the roles in the script. Finding them is not an easy task—as it involves both the director's decision whether the given person fits the role and the person's willingness to participate. Rarely is the process of "*recruiting* subjects" reported in detail. When it is (see Günther de Araujo, 1998), the picture that emerges is not that of easy and casual invitation to participate, happily accepted by the researchees, but instead a complex set of ritualistic persuasion efforts intended to address various suspicions and counter-investigative strategies.

Once the set of actors is finalized, the theatrical act is ready to be enacted. The script here is set not only by its core instruction ("Do X!") but in contrast to outer conditions of what not to do or how not to perform. Thus, in giving rating scale tasks with focus on the first association of the object with the scale points, any

[3] In psychology, several other genres of comparable structures are used: "interview," "testing," "therapy," etc. These all have their own theatrical setup that differs in some details from that given in Fig. 9.2 but remains similar in the focus on scientific encounter as a form of performance art.

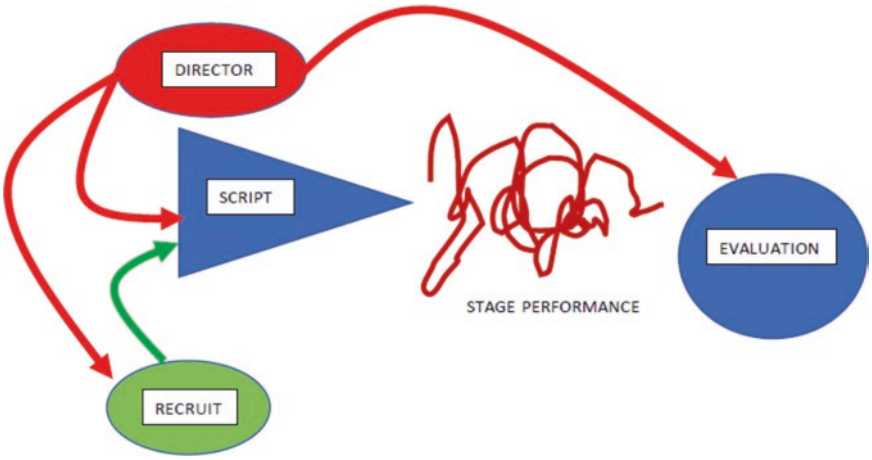

Fig. 9.2 Experiment as a theatrical stage performance

contemplation of the meanings of the scale end-points is de-emphasized (Rosenbaum & Valsiner, 2011). Likewise, there is no focus on elaborate and reflexive thinking through the meaning field in giving one's answer. The task is confined by borders, though the borders are not clearly set.

When participants switch between tasks, they are moving across normative situations and reconstructing the frame of their performance-participation. Chapter 6 (this volume) overviews the complexities of task switching in experiments, i.e., switching from one subset of instructions and rules to another set of instructions and rules. The authors point out that, despite the wealth of available data, the understanding of the underlying processes of task switching remains under-developed. Neglecting the theatrical structure of the situation of research, search continues for "inner" mechanisms and "underlying processes." A task is believed to be "loaded into working memory," rather than constructed in a collaborative process by the researchers and the researchees.

In a helpful illustration provided in Chap. 5, Ting (this volume) asks us to "imagine an experiment where participants are instructed to inhale pepper and then sneeze into the experimenter's face." She then asks, "Why is this instruction difficult to follow?" The norms that make such this strange—impolite, unhygienic, etc.—task difficult are, just as the instruction itself, in the social situation. The norms are not, at least not primarily, within the organism, inside the brain, or as contents of working memory. Instead, they are parts of larger, cooperative process in which a person can participate. The fact of conformity to a norm, or a request, is highlighted when there is a conflict between two norms (follow the instructions given by the researcher vs. maintain general good manners). The invisible "theatre director," by focusing all the attention on their research participants, downplays the presence of norms and the fact of social conformity.

Performance in an experiment, therefore, entails responsiveness to norms and the participants' co-construction of responses. While "the director" of the experiment might lose control over the actors' personal interpretations of their roles in the process of performing, she can certainly monitor the enactments and based on her evaluation of the process either trust or distrust the resulting data.

A good example here is the way in which a simple experimental procedure—the conservation of liquid quantity task of Jean Piaget—can be interpreted by actors of different background. The task is simple; the actor first evaluates the level of liquid in two similar-sized beakers (with the obvious result that the levels are judged to be the same). Then one of the beakers is poured into a third container with a wider base, and the actor is asked if the amount is the same or not. Obtaining the answer, "it is the same amount" is considered evidence of the cognitive achievement of conservation. This task works with children in occidental contexts as it follows the general principle that no liquid has been poured out from the system. The formally schooled actors in the West accept the general premise and do not question it.

However, when the task was carried out among the Qalandar in Pakistan (see account in Valsiner, 1984), the picture was very different. The Qalandar are peripatetic entertainers who earn their living from public presentation of tricks for their entertainment. The Piagetian experiment taken to the Qalandar was treated by them—the actors—as the task of finding out where is the "trick" in this show. And they easily found it—the amount of the liquid poured out is actually *not* the same because a very miniscule amount of it remains on the sides of the now empty beaker.

The two responses in the "conservation" experiment are based on two different ways of constructing the questions, only one of which aligns with the experimenter's assumptions. Studies reviewed in Chap. 7 (this volume) point to the fact that an explicit negotiation over interpreting the experimental situation is not necessary. Norms—which serve as the basis of co-construction—can be detected rapidly, effortlessly, and without direct instructions. Participants can move from "Are A and B contain the same amount of water?" to "Can you find how A and B are different despite appearances?" (Fig. 9.3). Based on their interpretations, research participants consider a type of action desirable or acceptable in a situation, without the researchers recognizing it. As a consequence, there are mismatches between how the situation interpreted by the participants and how it is interpreted by the researchers. Lacking a common interpretive basis—whereby the meaning of actions has already escaped the grasp of the researcher—there is no point in quantitative analysis of the "variables," just as there is no point in questioning the replicability of the results.

In Chap. 8 (this volume), Toomela emphasized the necessity of innovation with respect to methods. Scientific advancement requires advancement in methods, not the mindless application of the same methods. Methods, Toomela pointed out, cannot be separated from theories; methods are expressions of theoretical assumptions and commitments. Scientific activities are activities of knowing, which fundamentally differ from routinized (blind) production. The components that make up the whole of a scientific project are meaningful in light of that whole and because of their participation in the whole (see also Toomela, 2019; Valsiner, 2017). These

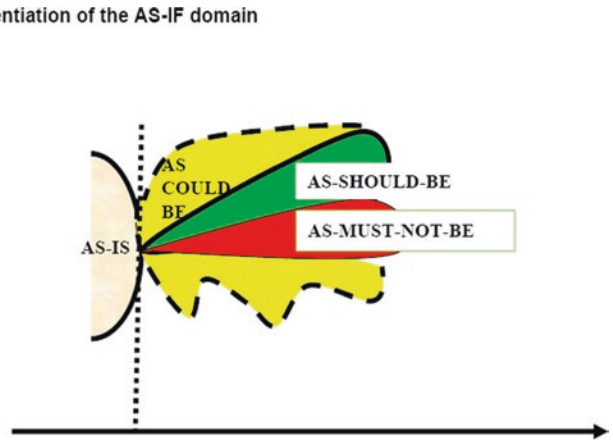

Fig. 9.3 How the experimental situation is interpreted shapes what is considered acceptable or desirable actions by the participants

components include the actions of research participants, which make sense only in light of the normative-descriptive framework surrounding the actions.

Seeking the Truth

> We are all engaged in truth seeking activities. When a politician suggests that we simply look at the facts—and that someone else's facts are fake—they are making a strong commitment to an objective reality. Similarly, when a psychologist reports that depressed people are more creative or that they have discovered the neural basis of semantic memory, they are making a commitment to a reality. An objective, reality is one that exists independently of human experience and can be known both formally through scientific method and informally by 'seeing it with your own eyes.' This stance toward reality is philosophical realism—the idea that things exist and have properties regardless of human minds (i.e., reality is mind-independent). (Matheson et al., this volume).

The idea of reality and commitments to that idea are expressed through controlled and controlling acts. When learning to perform such acts, we learn there are better and worse ways of representing the truth, i.e., better and worse ways of letting our acts be controlled by "matters of fact." However, control goes in both directions. While we might believe that it is only our acts that are controlled by reality, and our commitment to a faithful representation of reality, our acts of representation are themselves controlling acts. We cannot escape making pre-representational decisions, which enframe our representations of reality (Mammen, 2017), even though we might try our best to keep those decisions in the background.

Thus, it is worth asking whether and how a mere "commitment to reality" could be concealing another set of unexamined commitments that limit the kind of reality we find and describe. The unexamined commitments are akin to the theatre

director's rigidity to see what unfolds on the stage in only one way, decided in advance. We understand Pfister's (this volume) proposal for bold claims, i.e., explicit assertions regarding how we decide, limit, and control the phenomena under investigation, to urge readers in this direction. Advancing dialogue between theoretical-critical and experimental psychologists would benefit from the willingness of both sides to pay attention to all important aspects of research, to what is given frontstage view in the "theater" of the laboratory and what is working behind the stage—operationalizations, interpretations, generalizations, etc.

It is possible for an experimental researcher to feel impatient about critical and theoretical inquiries, to evade any critique of the basis of their research. It is possible to feel that seeing the laboratory as a theatrical process will only slow down the happenings on the stage. Such evasions, however, are detrimental to the researcher's own work. We hope the chapters in this volume demonstrate that the disconnect between a theoretical and experimental psychology does not mean safety and freedom for experimental research. The disconnect is within the very heart of experimental research, expressed as an inattention to human experience.

We hope readers of the present volume are not only incentivized, but equipped with practical suggestions, regarding how to place experimental research within a broader view and how to think about the significance and relevance of experimental findings from a perspective that remains mindful of the totality of human-social life.

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