

Freudian flip: Countering the rise of counter-psychology

A recent statement by cognitive scientists on recovered memory casts misleading doubts on the very underpinnings of Freudian psychology, while undermining the struggle against sexual violence perpetrated on children.

By Eran Rolnik | Haaretz Nov. 1, 2014



It's difficult not to be disappointed by the position statement issued recently by 47 Israeli scientists and researchers in the fields of cognitive psychology, the brain sciences and memory research on the

subject of repressed and reconstructed memories. The signatories objected to the readiness of the courts to convict defendants based on victims' memories of sexual abuse in childhood. They called on the Supreme Court to reconsider whether repressed memories that surfaced in the consciousness of female complainants many years after the alleged events should constitute admissible evidence. They also claimed that a deep dispute exists within the community of scientists researching the mind, the brain and human behavior concerning the possibility that a traumatic event, such as sexual abuse, would be erased completely from one's conscious autobiographical memory only to resurface suddenly years later. The statement added that no objective way presently exists to evaluate the reliability of repressed-reconstructed memories.

The timing of the statement – in disturbing proximity to the date on which the Supreme Court announced its decision to deny an appeal of a district court conviction – made the scientists' position statement a convenient target for public criticism. It is not surprising that many mental health professionals in Israel considered the declaration an attack on the court, and an attempt to pull the ground from under the struggle against sexual violence perpetrated on children.

An oped piece published earlier this month in Haaretz Hebrew edition by Prof. David Navon, a psychologist and an Israel Prize laureate in the social sciences, unwittingly reveals a bit of what the learned public statement almost managed to hide. Namely, that not only was this an attack on the

judiciary, but also that it was aimed at undermining the right of dynamic-oriented clinical psychology to claim true knowledge of any sort about the world – a right that the brain sciences and cognitive psychology maintain is their purview alone.

There are any number of ways available to invalidate a scientific or ideological stance. One of the most widespread is by revising history. Navon appears to undertake the mission of rewriting the history of the mental-health sciences with relish. He dismisses the professional term “repressed-recovered memories” as speculation dating from the 19th century that owes its popularity to its main proponent: Sigmund Freud. Freud is referred to by Navon as a pseudo-scientist and a fomenter of mythology.

The concept of the repression of traumatic memory, Navon avers, is not to be found among the groundbreaking insights of psychoanalysis. He also describes the idea of an awakening of a repressed memory as a “bizarre phenomenon” that has entered culture thanks to popular books and blockbuster movies.

Whole civilizations have tried to impart meaning and significance to the kind of “bizarre phenomena” – i.e., dreams, revelations, involuntary lapses in memory, slips of the tongue, incestuous wishes, and deceptions of the consciousness and the senses – that David Navon attributes to modern culture, movies and a certain Sigmund Freud. We can only wish for Navon, then, that his own contributions to the study of man will not be consigned to oblivion and will, in the future, gain fairer and more respectable historical appreciation.

‘The whale and the polar bear’

“The whale and the polar bear, it has been said, cannot wage war on each other, for since each is confined to his own element they cannot meet.” With these words, Freud cautioned his students, the “depth psychologists,” not to be drawn into theoretical arguments with workers in the field of psychology of consciousness who do not recognize the postulates of psychoanalysis and who look on its results as artifacts.. But the period in which the “whales” of depth psychology could allow themselves to adopt an approach of non-dialogue with the “polar bears” of cognitive psychology has passed. The dispute between the two central streams of psychology has long since emerged from the confines of academia and therapy rooms and trickled into every corner of our lives.

It’s not only the soon-to-be extinct whales of psychoanalysis who should be leery of the affair that psychology has been conducting with the brain sciences in recent years. The science-based discourse of our time – which seeks to reduce human beings to a sum of behaviors that can be empirically measured – encapsulates a deterministic and essentialist conception of humanity, of which the battle over the validity of repressed memory that resurfaces constitutes only a small part. Gerald Edelman, a neurobiologist and Nobel laureate in medicine, referred to this reductionist craze in cognitivist psychology: “One day, the most visible practitioners of cognitive psychology and the most arrogant empirical neurobiologists will finally understand that they have been the victims of an intellectual con-trick.”

It's never too late to recall that scientific knowledge is not knowledge of objective reality but knowledge of what is examinable by means of the scientific method. We can suppose that even the researchers who signed the public statement but who have never treated trauma victims know, or at least feel, that the subject of science and the subject of the mind are not identical. Whether or not they choose to remain confined in the objectivist fortress, those of them who think that traumatic memory, repression, splitting and dissociative amnesia are pseudoscientific speculations, rather than evidence-based mental phenomena, should find a way to express this opinion publicly that doesn't come at the expense of victims of sexual abuse whose cases are being dealt with in a court of law.

"The heart has not revealed it to the mouth," we read in *Kohelet Rabbah*, a commentary on *Ecclesiastes*. Allow me to hypothesize that behavioral psychologists and brain researchers, too, have an unconscious, and that their hearts know a great deal more about human nature than they imagine or come up with in their laboratory experiments.

What's at issue here is not the legitimate dispute over the character of the dialectical relations between facts and fantasies in the life of the mind. Nor is it a part of the complex debate concerning the devastating impact of massive psychic trauma on memory formation and mental representation. After all, psychoanalysis was the first to call into question the dichotomy between internal reality and external reality, and it was Freud's successors who noted the repeated reconstructions that underlie

autobiographical memory. Freud coined the term “screen memory,” in reference to the constructive character of childhood memories, long before cognitive psychology came into the world. Our childhood memories, he argued, show us our earliest years not as they were, but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused.

However, as I indicated, we would be mistaken if we view the public statement issued by the behavior and brain researchers as merely a contemporary, local version of the controversy between “whales” and “polar bears” over the authenticity of a recovered memory that emerges during psychotherapy. At hand is a completely different kind of debate that is equally dramatic: between those who are ready to accept the complexity of the human subject and the unavoidable uncertainties that are the constituents of his self-perception; and those who pretend to know the subject by applying absolute categories of truth or falsehood. It’s an encounter between psychology and “counter-psychology.”

Let’s return for a moment to history.

We are indebted to the late Amos Funkenstein, a historian and intellectual whose voice is sorely missed, for his important conceptual distinction between history and counter-history. Since ancient times, Funkenstein observed, counter-history has been a distinct genre of polemical historical writing whose aim is to distort the self-image and identity of the Other by destroying his collective memory. Counter-history, he argued, makes use of a rival’s most reliable sources in order to upend the memory

that underlies his self-perception.

Examples of counter-history cited by Funkenstein are the Marxist interpretation of history and the views of Holocaust-denying historians. The latter exploit the incomprehensibility and unfathomable nature of the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis to deny the very fact of their existence.

What makes one story truer than another? How shall we distinguish between a legitimate revision of a historical narrative, or an approach based on a scientific interpretation, on the one hand, and a revision that is made up out of whole cloth, on the other? The answer is that the authors of counter-history usually draw on the historical narrative they want to refute, and everything in the alternative narrative they propose is a reflection of the figure of the writer himself.

This, then, is the interpretation I propose to the statement made by the 47 researchers. Both the timing of its publication and its content suggest that, amid the abundance of the streams and schools of psychology, a counter-psychology is emerging and developing, its whole purpose being to sow doubt and undermine the contention that it is definitely possible to know something about subjective and objective reality and about their interconnection by means of dynamic clinical psychology such as that which has been developed and enhanced in the past 120 years.

The statement's signatories describe the memory of sexual abuse as "sincere but false." Let them not try to mislead us. Autobiographical memories, historical narratives and even court decisions may never be able to encompass the whole truth – but

that fact does not allow us to discard them as though they are false. It is for that reason that therapists, historians and judges alike do not determine their position on the basis of one piece of evidence or one repressed-reconstructed memory alone.

Those who signed the statement acted irresponsibly by exploiting a piece of scientific knowledge – that memories of childhood can be distorted -- in order to pull the wool over the public's eyes, question the legitimacy of the Supreme Court's verdict, and divert onto a sensationalist course the important discussion about the implications massive psychic trauma bears for human memory.

None of the distinguished scientists who signed the declaration would want to be remembered as having joined one of the more dubious families in the history of the sciences and ideas: the family of counter-scientists who use the truth in order to lie.