

The Kant of Psychology: Joseph Rychlak and
the Bridge to Postmodern Psychology

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One of my many graduate school experiences with Joseph Rychlak has always stood out to me, and it was not until I wrote this paper that I understood why. As a new graduate student – fresh out of my undergraduate work – I was astonished to hear other students occasionally refer to the esteemed Professor Rychlak as “Joe.” I immediately initiated a meeting with him to see what I should call him. He explained patiently that “Joe” was fine for informal settings but that he preferred “Dr. Rychlak” in more formal situations.

Later that month, my wife and I found ourselves at a Polish Easter feast, served at the Rychlak’s. Dr. Rychlak’s daughter, Stephanie, was lamenting the number of teachers at her high school who insisted on her calling them by their first name. She confessed to being uncomfortable with this practice and asked her Dad what he thought. He said first that he agreed with Steph – that formality was an important sign of respect. Then, turning to me with great solemnity, he uttered simply, “That’s why I insist on Brent calling me ‘his highness.’”

We all laughed, but part of me then and part of me now believes that this is the proper way of addressing Joe Rychlak. My belief is not because Joe is formal or despotic, but because he is intellectual royalty in our discipline – the kind that comes along only once a generation or so. Indeed, I would contend that he is the Kant of psychology (with George Kelly a close second). If you know anything about the

philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1927; 1929), you know that he is intellectual royalty. His works are widely held to be the intellectual watershed of the last two centuries (cf. Jones, 1969) – a watershed on the order of the Continental Philosophical Divide.

I contend that Joe Rychlak's works hold (or will hold) a similar status in psychology. I realize that this status is not as widely recognized as some of us would like, but this relative lack of recognition does not stop my contention from being true – indeed, true in many ways that Joe (as Kant before him) would not condone. My twofold purpose today, then, is to show or remind you of the similarity between Kant's work and Joe's (even the similarities in their personalities), and to outline how this work has helped fashion an intellectual bridge for many postmodern thinkers in psychology.

Their Personalities and Interests

Although I want to focus primarily on the similarity of their intellectual work, Rychlak and Kant have some interesting personal likenesses. The tense of my language here becomes a bit cumbersome when comparing these two men, because one is very much alive and the other is very much dead. Permit me to refer to both in the past tense, given Joe's retirement. Both were born of middle class, industrious, and religious parents. Both were themselves religious, with this openness to religious concepts reflected, I believe, in even their more secular work.

Both were also known for their entertaining and popular lectures as well as being excellent conversationalists and popular hosts. Indeed, unlike their scholarly writings, which can be fairly obscure and dense (at least according to my students), their personas in class were humorous and vivid. Their heavy teaching assignments prevented neither man from being an extremely productive scholar, due in no small part to their orderliness,

conscientiousness, and discipline – each getting small chunks of writing done on almost a daily basis. Unlike most academics, publisher deadlines with Kant and Rychlak were met almost without fail and with all the relevant publication details in place.

Their main scholarly interests were also strikingly similar, focusing primarily on epistemological topics, such as knowing, learning, and the nature and limits of science, as well as metaphysical topics, such as causality, time, and possibility. Even their scholarly avocations were interestingly parallel. Cowboy history could not have been an interest of the 18th century Prussian, as it is for Rychlak. Still, both did important, even foundational work in law, for example (Jones, 1969; Rychlak & Rychlak, 1990; Rychlak & Rychlak, 1998).

Perhaps most significantly, both scholars facilitated, I believe, Copernican type revolutions in their respective disciplines. To be sure, neither man set out to revolutionize their discipline; it just happened through their patient and steady work within the system. Just as Copernicus showed that the motion of planets involved the motion of the observer (an observation that Einstein would later extend into another revolution in physics; Slife, 1993), so too Kant and Rychlak showed their disciplines that the nature of reality involved the nature of the observer. Of course, Professor Rychlak's revolution of psychology has not yet come to its full fruition. However, it is coming, in my view, and is probably inevitable, given the force of both men's writings.

Unfortunately, as any historian of revolutions will tell you, revolutions are by their nature somewhat chaotic and unpredictable, moving in directions that a revolution's founder may not anticipate or even endorse. And so it is with Kant and Rychlak. Their insights have been parlayed and extended to support phenomenological and existential

lines of development that each would view as interesting, in some sense, but ultimately incomplete and perhaps even wrongheaded. Allow me now to briefly sketch some of their main contributions and see how these contributions have led to less-than-traditional notions of science and the scientific method.

Their Ideas

Virtually all of Rychlak's revolutionary efforts (like those of his intellectual inspiration, Kant) spring from the foundational insight that our very experience is interpreted. Sometimes termed the interpretive turn, this insight for Rychlak meant that learning and knowledge are essentially as conceptual as they are sensory. Most psychologists assume that the conceptual is an "add on" to our experience, with the sensory dictating our experience and the conceptual added on through the cognitive organization of the sensory. Rychlak, with the help of Kant, helped us to see that our lived experience is already conceptualized. Our experience is not just the world coming at us through our senses; our experience is the world already organized and structured and given meaning by our conceptual understanding – our phenomenal experience. As Kant once noted, "thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts are blind" (Reece, 1996, p. 374).

This elevation of the conceptual to a status comparable to that of the sensory implied in science the elevation of the theoretical to a status comparable to that of the data. Instead of the data being the final arbiter of the truth, Rychlak showed how the data are not data without some a priori theoretical conceptualization. In other words, Rychlak's work has been instrumental in our recognizing the import of theoretical work in psychological research (Slife & Williams, 1997). However, this understanding of

theory in science meant that many of the conceptions that we once thought our data provided, such as causal and temporal relations, involved theory as well.

Indeed, because of theory's involvement in scientific methods, Rychlak (1988) has shown us that the very same data can be interpreted (theoretically) in several equally viable causal and temporal ways (Slife, 1993). The data gathered by behaviorists, for example – long interpreted as hard evidence for efficient causal determinism – can just as easily be reinterpreted to support the final causality of free will (Rychlak, 1994).

Although philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper (1959) had long ago made the case for the underdetermination of scientific data, Rychlak not only applied this notion of underdetermination to psychology but also provided a theoretical grounding for his final causal reinterpretation. In my estimation, Rychlak's explanation and investigation of free will entails some of the most original thinking and research in the history of psychology.

Before Rychlak, two specific problems had long obstructed the path of previous scholars in providing this explanation – conventional conceptions of rationality and conventional conceptions of time. Conventional rationality permitted the human to reason only consistently and logically – disallowing the flexibility or, indeed, the inconsistency needed for an explanation of human agency or free will. Conventional time also restricted the past to an efficient causal determinant of the present. Either the past was relevant to the present, leaving the present and thus our will completely determined, or the past was irrelevant to the present, leaving the present without a meaningful context for the will (Rychlak, 1994; Slife & Fisher, 2000).

Rychlak overcame both of these intellectual barriers with, I believe, revolutionary insights. Regarding rationality, he realized that Western interpretations of logic and

reasoning were not truisms; they were Western interpretations. These interpretations were not “the way rationality is,” but instead the way rationality has come to be understood, selectively ignoring (for historical reasons) certain pivotal aspects of the way in which people understand and experience their reasoning. Drawing from Kant’s transcendental dialectic and Jung’s principle of opposites, Rychlak (1988) formulated the notion of oppositional reasoning as the origin of our phenomenal experience of options and possibilities. Epistemologically, we do not experience the world as it is, we experience the world as it is and could be – dialectically. In this sense, our experience of options and free will is not an “add on” to sensory experience, but is, in fact, already part and parcel of our experience.

Rychlak drew another foundational insight from Kant and extended it brilliantly to psychology – time itself was not an exclusively empirical phenomenon. Conventional understandings of time in psychology have conveniently overlooked the fact that the entity of time is never itself sensorily experienced, and thus not an empirical phenomenon (Slife, 1993; Slife, 2002). Yet, our knowledge of time is crucial to everything in psychology, from our notions of development to our explanations of the past causing the present. What if time is conceptual as well as sensory? As Rychlak showed, we have options concerning how we interpret and conceptualize time, much as with causality. Consequently, we can examine these conceptualizations theoretically and formulate them in ways that better fit our experience and our data.

Their Postmodern Elaborations

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon your philosophical perspective, these insights also became vital girders for the bridge to postmodern psychology. The

“interpretive turn” of Kant in philosophy and Rychlak in psychology was elaborated in ways that neither scholar expected or desired. Indeed, from a postmodern perspective, neither man “completed” the interpretive turn – turning, in a sense, only 90 of the 180 degrees that were needed. Let us first explore what a complete (180 degree) turn might look like, and then review the two insights that Rychlak reformulated with the inspiration of Kant – rationality and time – to see how each was extended to postmodern psychology, particularly phenomenology and existentialism.

Epistemologically, Kant and Rychlak asserted the importance of both the subject (interpreter) and the object (interpreted) for our phenomenal experience of the world. Although they each insisted on the importance of a reality beyond our phenomenal experience – Kant called this reality the noumenal world – the postmodernist could readily reject the importance or even existence of this reality without difficulty. After all, none of us ever gets outside our experience; our phenomenal experience is not only all that we have but also all that is relevant to us. Postmodernists see no need to keep the subject/object distinction (e.g., implicit in the noumena conception of Kant) and instead collapse this Cartesian dualism altogether. All relevant reality, in this sense, is an inextricably interpreted reality. The interpretive turn is complete (180 degrees) because lived experience does not even begin with the separation of subject and object.

Nevertheless, this understanding of experience creates a problem. Traditional scientific methods were originally formulated to discover a separate, objective reality (Slife & Williams, 1995; Slife, in press). Such methods were intended to detect what is “out there” in objective reality, as independently as possible of our subjective interpretations, biases, and values. However, with an interpretive turn of 180-degrees and

a collapse of Cartesian dualism, there is no objective reality to detect and no unbiased method for detecting this reality. There is only meaning (or interpreted reality) and only biased methods for understanding this meaning. Traditional scientific method, in this sense, is merely one set of biases, shot-through with values and the selective attention of any value-laden enterprise (Slife, in press). Consequently, postmodernists believe researchers of all stripes should admit to their pre-investigatory values and make certain that these values do not blind them to the meanings being investigated. This belief became the primary impetus for qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

For meaning to be meaningful, however, qualitative researchers had to assume that humans have possibilities. When a computer is programmed to say “I love you,” the computer cannot mean this phrase because it cannot say otherwise; it has no possibilities or agency. Recall, however, that Rychlak had formulated, and even empirically tested (Rychlak, 1994), a form of agency that permitted the “otherwise.” His work helped provide the conceptual scaffolding for postmodern psychologists to hold that humans could really mean something. Indeed, the braces of that scaffolding – his challenges of Western rationality and absolute time – are now pivotal to most postmodern agendas.

Let us first consider Western rationality. The Enlightenment that produced modernism spawned an era that is frequently called the Age of Reason (e.g., Jones, 1969). Consequently, the core of modernist psychology is its dependence on rationality (Polkinghorne, 1990) – in its investigative methods, its justifications, and even its theories and therapies – as the current “bandwagon” of cognitive theory and therapy clearly exemplifies. Rychlak, like Kant, relied heavily on rationality, most notably in his Logical Learning Theory (Rychlak, 1994). However, his challenge of the exclusive

hegemony of conventional rationality, through his notion of the dialectic, helped to break this dependence in psychology. Postmodern psychology has essentially filled in the gap left by this break, noting that such conventions of rationality are contextually and culturally contingent. Instead of a world with the primacy of rational and transcendent principles, the primordial world consists of various immanent and practical contexts (cf. Gunton, 1993; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

Much to the chagrin of Kant and Rychlak in their respective disciplines, their careful description of human reasoning led some scholars to deny the rational world and thus embrace the pluralism inherent in relativism and contextualism. Even the dialectic itself, held in check with conventional rationality under Kant and Rychlak, was extended by postmodernists into this pluralism. Jacques Derrida (1981), for example, contends that the function of signs requires “differance’,” or a type of oppositional meaning using Rychlak’s terms. However, according to Derrida, there is no way to bring a chain of differance’ to an end. Signs defer to one another continuously and without finality – an epistemological horror to most Kantians.

Rychlak’s (1981; 1988) challenge of time’s reification had a similar pluralistic effect. Absolute time and space were part of the Newtonian and modernist metaphysic in which all events were local and could be separately located (Slife, 1993). Scientific events, variables, and factors were thus contained within a certain region of time and space and only related together by virtue of their interaction across time and space intervals (Slife, 1995). Absolute or linear time has been especially important to this separation (or atomism) in psychology, because it separated the three dimensions of time

– past, present, and future – allowing past experiences to be separated from and thus explain and determine present behaviors and cognitions (Slife, 2002).

Rychlak's challenge of this temporal conception, however, also challenged this explanatory and deterministic framework. Exposing this framework's theoretical foundations, he opened the way for psychologists to seriously consider alternative frameworks for time, such as Heidegger's (1962) notion of temporality. Still, I believe that Rychlak and Kant would see Heidegger's temporality as taking things too far, much as Derrida (1981) did with the dialectic. First, rational principles are for Heidegger filled with time, and thus filled with era and culture – which may seem too contextual and relativistic for Rychlak. Second, temporality implies the temporariness of all rational principles, meaning that truth itself is not only situated but also has no finality or certainty. I believe that Kant and Rychlak would, again, have difficulty with this implication, even though their careful exposition of the subjective elements of time helped to make Heideggerian psychology possible (e.g., Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife, 2002).

Conclusion

We could and perhaps should ask whether this postmodern elaboration of the work of Rychlak (and Kant) has any significance for psychology. There is certainly no doubt about the import of the interpretive turn for the humanities (e.g., Ricoeur, 1981). Still, some researchers would say that psychology is a science and thus should have no part in the issues of postmodernism. The problem is, as Rychlak has so cogently argued, the theoretical issues of any science blurs the distinction between the sciences and the humanities. At the very least, I would contend that these avenues of research deserve

exploration in psychology, including qualitative methods. In other words, we should examine the implications of a complete interpretive turn, how ever productive or unproductive it may be.

Still, Rychlak's legacy does not depend on the productivity of these postmodern avenues of inquiry. His intellectual position is secure in either of two senses: either as the intellectual revolutionary who helped us to see and truly conceptualize the humanity of humans – their agency and their meaning – or as the intellectual bridge that helped us to explore the psychological importance of the interpretive turn. In either case, Rychlak is a true innovator in psychology – one of the very few of this century. As such, he is clearly deserving of the appellation “his highness” because he is, to my way of thinking, the intellectual royalty of our discipline – the Kant of Psychology.

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