

# The Business of Understanding Psychology

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Although Karl Jaspers, who died in 1969, was the first psychologist (his main psychological work was “General Psychopathology”) to clearly present the phenomenological method that later characterized much of the German social sciences and psychological conceptualizations, he remains unknown. I have always been attracted to this great philosopher. Let me explain to the readers why this is the case.

According to Jaspers, human beings are:

1. Existence in the world
2. Consciousness
3. Mind

As consciousness, we become aware; only what I am aware of exists to me. As mind, we can develop ideas about our experiences and thus explain them by thinking beyond what we can actually experience.

Mere existence does not give us any knowledge about others. To study human beings, we must use our consciousness and our mind. As consciousness, we can understand others through shared experiences. This understanding has to be empathic, intuitive and the result of fair identification with the other in order to understand from the inside.

We phenomenological describe others’ psychological states and qualities in terms of how they are experienced, and also understand the emergence of psychological connections, such as between a person being attacked and the anger to the other.

In order to understand a person, we must study his or her expressions, gestures, and oral/written communications, including self-descriptions and life story, as well as reports of others who have known the person.

Human behavior, however, has some biological bases that cannot be understood from within, that are putting one into someone else’s shoes. While biological factors limit understanding, they can be explained by means of theories. Therefore, such casual explanation is from outside. The methods used for casual explanation are experimentation and statistics. Psychology, and perhaps all social sciences, must attempt at integrating the

inside and outside dimensions while aiming at a significant explanation. This requires formal education and training.

There remains an area of human functioning that it is still difficult to explain regardless if the social scientist uses the inside and the outside. This is the case for human freedom. It can be grasped through one's feeling of freedom of choice and through an appreciation of the impossibility of predicting an individual act with full certainty. For Jaspers, freedom is outside psychology as a science, just as it is outside physics following the uncertainty principle.

Understanding depends on the researcher's ability to understand! What is not understandable to the researcher, he or she tries to grasp as biological. This is the case when a researcher may posit the existence of dispositions. Sine dispositions do not refer to "what is" but to "what can be", the concept becomes appeal to freedom. For Jaspers, personality is open-ended. Thus, we can always discover something new about a person.

We understand human beings through an understanding of certain aspects about them: urges that can result from accumulated tension or from feelings of emptiness and boredom; through the understanding of their knowledge and of what someone else's knowledge means to them (how they acquired it, formally or informally, and what effect, if any, has upon their actions); and through an understanding of their basic beliefs. Drives may appear periodically or at any time (like hunger). Some can be temporarily satisfied completely and others like curiosity increases with satisfaction.

We can also understand logically contradictory, psychological tensions, such as internal conflicts, as well as dialectical movements, such as sudden changes in feelings. We understand the feedback loops directing thinking, feeling, acting and self understanding of the other person (his or her reflection, distinguishing intentional action from unintentional occurrences, which merely happen to someone).

The interesting thing about Jaspers' phenomenological perspective is that the researcher tries different assumptions, to see where they lead. The researcher is continuously conscious of his or her assumptions and critically reflects upon them. This requires clear and specific definitions of terms. Psychology is the study of the whole resulting from all psychic processes and expressions moving beyond themselves to the individual's entire understandable connections that create the particular self.

As a whole, the particular self stands in a loosely-coupled relationship to its elements. It is composed of elements that are meaningful only in their relationship to the whole. However, it is not possible to grasp the entire

human psychological structure, but at best come to conclusions while analyzing and synthesizing the parts. There is always room for contingencies and surprises.

Karl Jaspers' strong point was that contradictory elements form dialectical relations. If someone is entirely free of fear, it makes no sense to call him or her courageous. Someone who is free of possessiveness cannot be considered generous.

The study of human psychology is ambiguous as it is all understanding psychology. Jaspers recognized these challenges for psychology even before Heisenberg discovered those of physics and Goedel those of mathematics.

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