

One more time: not just (with) words, but feelings

This article is a commentary on 'Beyond belief', by Cromby (2012)

We need a kind of understanding to do with trying to do something, with making successful subsidiary moves toward an overall final goal before our actual achieving of it. To do this we not only need to know what the overall task before us looks like prospectively, we also need an embodied sense of the relevant criteria for use in judging our success at achieving these subsidiary tasks along the way (Shotter, 2010: 269)

I will say from the get-go, I admire and respect John Cromby's work and have done so for some time. Over the years, in different ways, I have struggled to engage with 'the affective turn' that Cromby has been at the forefront of pursuing and I will briefly mention the main reason for this below. Nevertheless, what I appreciate about his position is that it speaks to an enabling form of psychological inquiry which remains purposively in touch with people and life experience. The key point I raise in this brief commentary is that herein (and elsewhere) Cromby actively assists those of us interested in psychological theorisation by providing a means to an experiential understanding of personhood which is always inclusive of situated ontological variability.

Sometime ago Harré (1995) called for psychological theory to engage an ontology of activity and this invitation is what Cromby embraces in his argument involving belief. To set the stage for the ensuing discussion, Cromby goes to some length looking at religiosity or spirituality (R/S), then to lesser extent, social cognition models and philosophical views. I am unsure of the reasons Cromby gave greater attention to the R/S examples. My own process of word association brought forth the idea of optimism as an apparent correlate to belief. Possibly via the R/S invocation aspects concerning affect or feeling are more readily linked than say if he were to use optimism as a case in point. No doubt most readers would be aware of the perceived connection between optimism and health investigated in the literature (for e.g. Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010; Mulkana & Hailey, 2001; Peterson & Bossio, 1991). Either way, we still end up critiquing social cognitive theories (such as Ellis [1962] or Beck [1967] and the ABC model linking adversity to beliefs to consequences which was surprisingly left out of the paper). Such theorisation remains dominant in disciplinary and lay views of psychosocial action implicitly separating cognition from affect and positing both as internalised-to-people processes.

To this extent, I am somewhat cautious of Cromby's suggestion that 'thinking is already a social process' (2012: 4). Not with where I pre-empt him going with the idea but that he may possibly be getting ahead of the dominant discourse without providing the theoretical breadcrumbs for others to venture away from the known and find their way back (if they so decide). I fully agree that psychologists in the main treat belief as largely a psychological state and this is particularly evident in the social cognitive tradition. For this reason I was surprised by the limited attention given in the opening of the paper to this area of theory. I am labouring this point because many psychologists continue to theoretically picture a dualist form of personhood i.e. a separation between internal cognition and external social action,

when evidencing the social nature of thinking. This is not the vacuity of high cognitivism but the person-in-the-worldliness of social constructivism (Kelly, 1955; Ubbes, Black & Ausherman, 2010). My concern with this viewpoint (and possibly the reason for my unease in coming to terms with the ‘affective turn’) is by not attending to the dualism inherent in dominant psychological models of personhood, psychology leaves undisturbed the contention that feelings too occur within this divorced notion of personhood. At this dichotomised juncture I worry that we are not too far away from a return to the Lazarus/Zajonc debate of the early 1980s on the primacy of cognition versus affect. Cromby goes some way to disputing this (see 2012: 11) but we need to be explicit here. The point regarding Cartesian subjectification is not simply about thinking versus feeling; it is just as much about the internal versus external vantage points from which psychology has been positioned. Assuredly, Cromby addresses this issue later in the paper with his discussion concerning bi-directionality or reciprocity between discourse and a structure of feeling.

In offering a different kind of psychology my preference is to target and clearly distinguish between dualist and non-dualist accounts. In this way, I believe the idea of a psychosocial comes closer to being understood (cf. Stenner, 2007). Recently I outlined how this position might be applied using health education as an example (Corcoran, in press). My concern there was prompted by the idea that those involved in such work maintain an implicit theoretical paradox by approaching health education practice from a position of psychological individualism. In doing so, varieties of knowledge – which belief must certainly be considered to be one kind – dissociate life from learning or the psycho from the social. Here then, although not specifically engaged in the discussion (interesting however to see Vygotsky called upon), Cromby’s ideas may well service future consideration regarding embodied aspects of learning.

One way Cromby tries to extend the idea that thinking (or feeling or ‘felt thinking’ so described) is always already social is by invoking discursive psychology (DP) as a theoretical option. A very credible option as I see it but theoretical work in the area has moved forward from thinking of DP theory as homogenous. As Cromby (2012: 5) indistinctly says:

Discursive explanations of the variability and situatedness of belief in everyday life come at the cost of obscuring the ways in which beliefs can compel and organise activity, and of how they persist across social and material contexts. DP’s constructionist focus on beliefs’ discursive deployment largely conceals their enduring, normative aspects, and does not adequately consider their emotional, felt or affective dimensions.

The issue I take up here is not, as Cromby suggests, with constructionism, it is with the kind of DP he is used to encountering. Previously I have drawn attention to two kinds of DP based on differing forms of constructionism (Corcoran, 2009). The version of DP most psychologists are aware of is reliant upon a form of epistemic constructionism (Potter, 2010; DPEC). I wholeheartedly agree with Cromby and have argued similarly that DPEC struggles in providing adequate sociohistorical accounts of life. Alternatively, the kind of

constructionism I am interested in is engaged ontologically because of its openness to historical practices, like beliefs, becoming part of our human condition – part of who we are. Not only is this understanding different from psychological accounts based on essentialised first nature views of ontology but it is also different from DPEC accounts which struggle to engage in the ontological nature of psychological work.

Belief, as Cromby states, is ‘something that is lived’ (2012: 5) but let us take that a step further to say that belief is an act of the living. I take this lead from Billig (2011: 11) who openly admits: ‘As psychologists, we study what people do, feel, believe, etc., and by our technical language of nominals, we turn doing, feeling, believing, etc., into things’. In processes of objectification (as in the example of knowledges appropriated for health education mentioned above), social scientists tend to suck the life out of what they intend to describe turning living prospective action into already played out accounts. I know this was not the aim of Cromby’s statement for the paper hurtles toward the anticipatory point that ‘belief is a structure of feeling that enacts and reproduces personally held, socially-obtained values’ (2012: 17). But psychologists have to remain ever vigilant and purposeful regarding the way in which we talk about life. At this juncture I invite Shotter to the conversation for his more recent work was noticeably absent from Cromby’s argument and in my view, has much to contribute. In considering belief to be an act of the living we turn to the prospective nature of joint action.

Borrowing from Wittgenstein (1953), Shotter has been interested in understanding ways in which living occurs or in the former’s terms, how a person is able to go on in a given circumstance or situation. This, it is suggested, presents us with ‘difficulties of *orientation* not to do with our ways of thinking, but with our embodied ways of relating ourselves to our surroundings – of spontaneously experiencing what our contexts require of us, what we should anticipate as we move around within them as having to do next’ (Shotter, 2010: 277, my emphasis). Let us consider a specific example close to my heart. For a number of years I practiced as a psychologist working with adolescents in schools. As most (particularly parents) would attest, high schooling years are tumultuous times for many young people as they attempt to navigate their way through a myriad of unique social situations and life experiences. Issues pertaining to health have considerable impact within this period (Breinbauer, 2005). For instance, it is in adolescence that we take on habits which have the propensity to remain with us for years to come (e.g. use of alcohol, tobacco and/or illegal drugs). As Cromby (2012: 15) rightly suggests, beliefs are ‘complex, variegated habits of felt thinking’ and we must attend to the situated ontological variability of these. In fact, Cromby’s notion of felt thinking compares favourably with Shotter’s application (borrowed from William James) of ‘felt tendencies’. Shotter explains: ‘The relevant shared background of felt tendencies to act in certain ways in response to previous actions of others is intrinsically present in all our everyday encounters. It is present in our capacities as unique personalities with unique characteristics to uniquely tailor our actions to our circumstances in ways which make sense to those around us’ (2010: 275). How then might we revisit,

particularly from within psychological theory, the situated ontological variability of adolescent health-related beliefs?

Of course, that question is not going to be satisfactorily answered in this final paragraph though it certainly provides health psychologists with an indication as to how to go on. Cromby has and continues to offer us a means to orienting our practice toward understanding people in the living of their lives. In the case of humanity's being we are advised to seek out the resourcefulness of one relating to another from within their shared surroundings and not opine, as some psychologists tend to do, on a person's normatively gauged inabilities. In drawing our attention to ideas like felt thinking we are enabled to engage an ontology of activity which is 'socially, materially and bodily constituted within experience and subjectivity' (2012: 18). Most importantly, Cromby's is not an invitation to isolation or abstraction but contingency and embeddedness. As far as psychological theory is concerned, surely that is something worth believing in.

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