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De-Fragmenting Social Science? A Review of Farewell to Variables

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Abstract

I review *Farewell to Variables*, a recent edited volume by cultural psychologists collaborating with Jaan Valsiner. I relate "variable thinking" to challenges faced in conducting qualitative research, and in relating to everyday life.

Keywords

variables, qualitative research, cultural psychology

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Acknowledgements

In memory of Andy Lock and John Shotter

De-Fragmenting Social Science? A Review of Farewell to Variables

Tom Strong
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I review *Farewell to Variables*, a recent edited volume by cultural psychologists collaborating with Jaan Valsiner. I relate "variable thinking" to challenges faced in conducting qualitative research, and in relating to everyday life.

Keywords: variables, qualitative research, cultural psychology

Introduction

What began as a useful methodological tool ended up dictating how theoretical concepts of human psychology could be articulated at all. And through looping effects, we have all come to understand ourselves as intuitive statisticians, as dependent variables, as members of series that are affected by underlying causes. (Brinkmann, 2022, p. 56)

At first consideration the book title, *Farewell to Variables*, should be uncontroversial for qualitative researchers. Variables are central to "quantitative" social science and translate factors attributed to human phenomena into discrete measures useful in explaining causes for any phenomenon. The logic I am describing hinges on being able to use language to identify then measure a phenomenon's parts, and as Brinkmann (2022; a contributor to *Farewell to Variables*) suggests, it is a logic that may operate intuitively. While qualitative researchers avoid causal claims and avoid quantifying, they typically partition what they observe or are told into themes and categories to account for phenomena. For Jaan Valsiner, the book's editor, variable thinking promotes a sense that a dependent variable (a study phenomenon) is a function of independent variables. A qualitative researcher's themes and categories can inadvertently convey this sense of dependent and independent variables.

Background

Valsiner, until he recently retired, held the Niels Bohr Chair in Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University in Denmark. He has been central to bringing a Vygotskyan cultural-activity approach to making sense of psychology's subject matter, an approach that integrates personal and socio-cultural ways of being. Cultural psychology may sound like an oxymoron; and it would be if psychology (my discipline) was able to identify universal human attributes beyond any cultural differences. For Valsiner and contributors to this volume, cultural psychology does not divide the whole (person-in-environment) into separated parts though this latter kind of variable thinking took root in personality psychology and made its way into other facets of psychology and social science. What matters to the authors of this edited book is that variable thinking, particularly in psychology, has messed with the everyday recognition that being human involves adjusting to situational challenges and constraints (human, geographic, socio-material). Social science variables tend to convey static properties to what is measured, suggesting a kind of constancy across situations, while cultural psychologists favour looking

at how people do their culturally situated ways of living differently and dynamically. Variables, in this sense, reduce and distort how life is lived, something that can still happen through how qualitative research themes are used to reflect the variability of culturally situated living.

Review

Farewell to Variables will be challenging for readers unfamiliar with philosophy of science critiques of quantitative psychological (and social science, more generally) research. Some of these critiques date back to Harre and Secord's (1972). "The explanation of social behaviour," which long ago argued that human behaviour needed to be studied and explicated differently from how one might study and explain rocks and trees. Humans were not machines; they acted according to culturally informed sense-making and could give reasons for why they did what they did. But psychologists did not put much stock in what is now known as people's "ordinary language" accounts, seeking instead causal variables they could identify, quantify, and then manipulate in experimental conditions – to get at 'what was really going on' when humans behave as they do. Readers are reminded of the early German psychologist, Wundt's, fork in his research road: study humans for how they "introspected conditions" (gave reasons) for what they did, or study them for how they acted under controlled laboratory. The latter experimental method won out for at least a century in psychology and the legacy of variables thinking has deeply influenced the thinking of the western world.

Over eleven chapters, the international contributors to this book take up a range of topics beyond a philosophy of science critique of variables thinking: developmental psychology, psychology of learning, cultural differences, "mental" activities, and human development understood ecosystemically. One chapter studied children's use of pictures and symbols for their inquiry processes – prior to their learning the more formal scientific concepts for what they had been engaged in learning. Another chapter reflects upon what happened as Euro-American psychological variables were adapted to the Indian context. Throughout the book are juxtapositions of the cultural psychology approach to understanding situated human activities and the conventional psychological approach of using presumably universal (i.e., decontextualized) variables to account for such activities. The cumulative effect was to have me re-think how much variable thinking had infiltrated my qualitative researcher consciousness.

Conclusion

Farewell to Variables was a rewarding read and it served to remind me of how common parts-whole thinking has become, even in qualitative research. While most qualitative researchers are comfortable in using the ordinary language of research participants in making sense of these participants' actions and reasons, they also face understandable tensions when trying to thematize and find common language across participants for any given phenomenon. I was reminded of how often qualitative theses, dissertations, and prospective articles I had been asked to examine reported the themes identified in the research according to their frequency – as if they were results in a quantitative stepwise regression. More troubling for me to reflect upon, however, was the premise that variable thinking has seeped into how people generally think about causes for social behavior in reduced, statistically normative ways that lack the kind of situated holism that these authors were highlighting. To close with Jaan Valsiner's words:

The fundamental psychological reality is made up of persons who act and interpret their own lives and are engaged in participant relations with their

fellow human beings. We participate in our own development – coordinating it with that of others. Overlooking this nature of human development would be an act of epistemological violence towards human understanding. (2023, p. 218)

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Author Note

Tom Strong is a Professor Emeritus and psychologist from the University of Calgary. He writes on the collaborative, critical and practical potentials of discursive approaches to psychotherapy and counselling. Currently, he is coediting the *Routledge International Handbook of Postmodern Therapies*. For Tom's website and contact details, please see: <https://wpsites.ucalgary.ca/tom-strong/>

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