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Our listening problem

Purpose

The purpose of this blog is to show how Victorian Era philosophy, still guiding science today, generates a listening problem that obscures our understanding of our social nature.

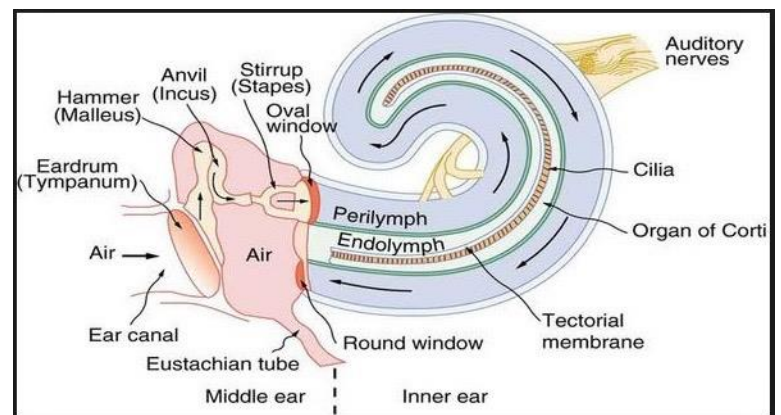
Hearing and listening.

The human ear really blows my mind..

The cochlea is a biological miracle transforming liquid wave energy into electrical energy. Cochlea is from the Greek, meaning spiral or, perhaps

because of its uncanny resemblance, snail shell. A fork falls off the dinner table, creating sound wave energy. The sound waves move through the ear canal and finally the eardrum. Sound wave energy moving through the ear canal caresses the outside of the eardrum. On the inside of the eardrum, the sound waves transform into mechanical energy through the ossicles – the good ol’ hammer, anvil and stirrup we learned about in grade school.

As if it didn't have enough to do, the inner ear has two functions. Think of a small mountain and imagine there is a network of caves underneath it. That describes the bone



surrounding the inner ear. It consists of three semicircular canals, lined with a special tissue that has nerve endings sensitive to movement. The cavities turn to canals, in which fluid is enclosed. The fluid interacts with nerve endings and is constantly signaling our state of balancing. This is one function of the cochlea – helping us keep our balance.

Going back to our dropped fork, sound wave energy has traveled a short distance through the ear canal to the eardrum. With the fork's sound waves beating unique rhythms on the outside, on the inside the ossicles begin to move, transforming sound wave energy into physical energy. The ossicles are connected to an “oval window” on the outside of the cochlea. Which is filled with liquid. When the ossicles tap the oval window another transformation occurs. The mechanical energy vibrations of the ossicles turn into liquid energy inside the cochlea flowing toward the organ of corti. The organ of corti is a layer of skin lined with hairs activated by the flowing liquid. These hairs activate nerve endings, transforming the liquid waves into electrical energy. A simple way to look at the cochlea's structure is to imagine straightening it out and turning it into a odd kind of piano keyboard with hairs representing piano keys. The hairs, activated by flowing liquid transform the liquid energy into electrical energy.

Hearing is the result of these recursive transformations of energy. Sound wave energy is transformed into mechanical energy as it passes through the eardrum to the ossicles. The mechanical energy is transformed into liquid wave energy as the ossicles tap the oval window of the cochlea. This liquid wave energy flows over the organ of corti where it is transformed into electrical energy that connects to the brains' frontal lobe. All of this is

happening in a constantly changing flow of wave energies. And, because we have two ears, it happens to us in stereo!

My hearing is not very good. I have two problems. The first, as I understand it, happened when I was six months old. I remember sleeping peacefully, nestled between my Mom and Dad. All of a sudden, the bedroom light came on and my Mom and Dad gasped.

This was my first memory. My head was lying in a pool of blood and pus. While my Mom and Dad were panicked, I actually felt great. Evidently, the reason I was in their bed was because I kept them up most of the night crying and screaming in pain. I had an infection in the middle ear. Pressure grew until my eardrums burst, leaving a hole. Now the inner ear and the outer ear were open to the wind. Like I said, the human ear blows my mind. Now that the pressure subsided, I was sleeping like a baby in a blissful tranquility. I lost my eardrums and some function of my ossicles. To what extent, they were originally damaged I do not know. The holes in my eardrums were replaced by scar tissue resulting in a conductive hearing loss. Everything that happens in a system is determined by its structure [1]. My eardrum and middle ear system structure had been altered and so was my hearing. I now have hearing aids to compensate for my hearing loss.

The second problem we all share. Occasionally, my sweetheart Anastasia and I will be having a conversation when she asks, “*Did you hear what I just said?*” “*Oh yeah.*” I reply and as soon as the words slide past my lips, I want to take them back. “*Ok. What did I say?*” she asks it as a question but I’m sure she knows the answer. I might try to

squirm my way out of it, but, I always end up apologizing for not listening. This used to really get to her, and it should, we all want to be heard, because we all want to be understood. These days, we mostly laugh at me when this happens.

In this situation, I do not have a problem hearing (other than the holes in my eardrums). I have a problem listening. For those of us interested working to improve social wellbeing, we have a significant listening problem that has nothing to do with our hearing, but, is a history of beliefs that determine how social science is done.

Our listening problem.

Those of us interested in understanding social impact and social wellbeing have a listening problem that is the consequences of accepting a 19th century philosophy of science. Philosophical guidelines for social science and the social movement of eugenics co-mingled and shaped research and evaluation practices. Seven requirements for understanding the social sciences are worth mentioning because they constitute the basis for understanding our social nature still present today. In total, these guidelines bring forth a pseudo-science of social separation that obscures our social nature.

- 1) Separation of the observer from the observed. Realizing that researchers were “members of the herd” they wished to study, statistician Karl Pearson, called for a “higher type of medicine man” to “repress sternly the personal and place himself

outside the herd for the advancement of science.” [2]. This results in uni-directional relationships, whereby the researcher comments on the observer, but, the observer does not comment on the researcher.

- 2) Replacement of human narrative by statistical calculations. The Victorian Era philosophy of eugenics argued that statistical differences in body types and intelligence “*proved*” that some races were inferior to others. Hence, statistical studies, such as intelligence quotients, became the superior method for understanding the social sciences [2].
- 3) Separation of emotions from science and scientific methods. The philosopher, Herbert Spencer, translated Charles Darwin’s work on biological adaptation into the social sciences as meaning “*survival of the fittest*” [3]. He wrote that “*passion perverts judgment*” and that emotions created “*subjective difficulties*” [4]. This logic removed emotions from scientific methods.
- 4) Separation of morals from science and scientific methods. Francis Galton, was a statistician, who invented the word *eugenics* and applied it to Spencer’s notion of survival of the fittest [5] wrote, “*We must leave morals out of the discussion, not entangling ourselves with the almost helpless difficulties as to whether a character as a whole is good or bad.*” [6]. Morals are shaped by the history of ethics that exist in the present as a network of conversations that care for people.

- 5) Separation of ethics and religion from science and scientific method. The previously mentioned English philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote of two motives that founded his philosophical questions. One was from ethics and religion and the other was from science. He chose science over ethics and religion claiming that both were “*never impartial and thus never scientific.*” [7].

- 6) Separation of wholeness from science and scientific methods. Russell did not believe in “*complex systems bound together into some kind of unity*” [8] thus dismissing wholeness [7].

- 7) Science and scientific method are analytic. In rejecting wholeness and complex systems Russell believed that the essence of scientific method was analysis and not synthesis [7].

These seven guidelines for practicing social science generate blindness because they dismiss our human nature and history as social beings and alter our capacity to listen and hear those we wish to understand. If followed, the guidelines leave us with an illusion of social separation. To better understand social impacts leading toward the conservation and expansion of social wellbeing, I propose seven remedies for improving our listening problem:

- 1) Integrating the observer and those they observe. We cannot separate the observer from the observed. We are all observers observing observers. By

accepting everyone they observe as legitimate observers, the observer generates a reflective network of conversations and a criterion of validation, or, being understood.

- 2) Using systemic listening to generate valid human narratives. By taking action on the next five remedies, we can bring forth a social understanding that is validated by all of those participating in studying social impact and social wellbeing. This does not imply that human narrative replace statistics, but, acknowledges the need for qualitative practices that reveal those relational behaviors that bring about social wellbeing.

- 3) Understanding emotions and feelings. Human beings are emotional beings. Our emotions flow within our multisensorial nervous system and through the network of networks of our conversations. Accepting our emotional nature will lead to a greater understanding of wholeness. It will also bring freedom to the scientist-practitioner to share her feelings with those she is listening to as she listens to them and celebrates her learning [9, 10].

- 4) Acting in an ethical network. Our actions to understand social impact need to occur in a network of networks of conversations coordinating social caring. Ethics is not a matter of moral judgment, but, a social network of caring for others and ourselves and history tells us this is fundamental to human survival.

- 5) Integrating science and spirituality. In our daily living, we can see the social impact of science and spirituality. They both arise in networks of conversations that generate knowledge. In integrating science and spirituality, spiritual experiences will become a legitimate domain for scientists to study and empirical studies will become a legitimate practice for spiritualists.

- 6) Understanding systemic social impact. There can be little or no value in analyzing systems. Doing so studies the parts of a system while disregarding relations amongst the parts. Social and biological systems are best understood by understanding the relational structures that determine everything that occurs in the system. Because so little work has been done in the social systemic domain, an inductive approach should not begin with problems, but with the social wellbeing being accomplished in our daily living and working well together.

- 7) Listening systemically. We are all systemic listeners. Our earliest languaging experiences as children are relational. Scientific practices are not restricted to analysis but need to include qualitative practices that listen to one person at a time to understand the whole social system.

Sociology was first thought of as social physics [11] and this looking toward physics to understand our social nature continues today. This can be as confusing as it is helpful. Take complexity theory as it relates to our social nature. Are relations with one another

complex? Or, is the manner of theorizing about our social nature making it appear so? Social action research invites us to reflect upon how we do what we do in our daily living in the creation of social wellbeing. It is an inductive systemic listening leading toward understanding our wholeness. The quality of social action research is dependent upon its individual and social validity, asking the individual participant and the social network of participants if they have been understood. It also is an ethical practice. In caring for all of those collaborating in social action research, it does not seek to solve problems like other action research practices [12, 13]. Instead, it brings forth an understanding of how people do what they do in generating social wellbeing. This does two things. It improves social health and productivity, and leads to the conservation and expansion of social wellbeing. Social action research offers a scientific alternative to the present day use of logic theory [14] used by foundations and governments to understand the social impacts they invest in.

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