Moles, misjudgement and moral character: A last response to John Paley

CrossMark

Introduction

Readers may be tiring of the disagreements between John Paley and others on how we account for and explain behaviour, especially, absent or negligent care. Paley's responses show the hallmarks of one who cannot countenance the possibility that someone in 'the literature' does not share his views and who thus feels the need to extinguish every spot-fire of difference as it emerges. Perhaps I may be allowed one last sally forth in resting my case.

I struggled with how to respond to Paley's response. Do I play 'whack-a-mole' with all his mistaken assertions or find more positives in the dialogue to date? His opening salvo did not bode well for my positive project. Paley feels that I and other critics "ripped into his editorial without stopping to wonder whether a 1200 word opinion piece is really going to tell the whole story" (Paley, 2014a, p. 468). What would possesses him to imagine that I would expect him to 'tell the whole story' in 1200 words (about what? Mid staffs, the crisis in care, the 'person-situation' debate or maybe life in general?). At no point in my response did I criticise a lack of coverage, a superficiality or mention any missing aspects that Paley 'should have discussed'. His initial 1200 words were more than enough for me. If this was any more of a straw man it would be a nesting site. Mole #1. Whack.

I'd like to try a different tack here which is to suggest areas where Paley and I might actually be in some agreement, surprising as this may seem.

Don't be an 'SIF'

American politics is said to be plagued by 'SIF's - 'single issue fanatics'. I hope that neither Paley nor I fall into this trap in relation to the 'person-situation' debate. I will happily 'let this go' and move on to other issues, hoping that I have managed to avoid lapsing into any blinkered stance that dismisses persons, situations, morality, character, epigenetics, neurobiology or any of the other plethora of factors that make up the endless complexity of who we are, what we do, why we do it and how we understand each other.

I'm with Karl Popper when he suggests that we:

"Give up the idea of ultimate sources of knowledge, and admit that all knowledge is human; that it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams and our hopes; that all we can do is grope for truth even though it is beyond our reach (Popper, 2002, p. 39)

I'm not sure how much clearer I could have made it that I do not subscribe to a polarised 'either/or' situation OR disposition/

character view of human behaviour and how we make sense of and judge this:

'People are not collections of template personality traits that predetermine their every waking action. Nor are people automatons devoid of agency and shaped unwittingly by an all-powerful external 'context'.' (Darbyshire, 2014, p. 888–889)

And to reinforce this:

'The nurse as an individual is inescapably part of a wider context, whether that be society as a whole or the more immediate organisational context of the workplace.' (Darbyshire, 2014, p. 889)

Given that even Paley could not read this and maintain that I am dismissive of the importance and role of social situations, perhaps his gripe is that I won't agree with him and the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) school **strongly enough** by abandoning the belief that something called character or integrity may still be very important. Is it only my total agreement that will suffice? If this is the case, then perhaps we can only agree on key principles but agree to differ on the question of relative importance. This may be reasonable, but I suspect that Paley is more intent on being right. If it is the case, that we disagree on degree, readers may well roll their eyes and ask of these exchanges, 'Is that **IT**?'

It may well be. I can see no mutually acceptable way to assess or calculate exactly what a 'Paley approved' explanatory ratio of personal/character to situational factors would look like. Paley's questions about the absurdity of base-rates and percentages in connection with mitigation seem equally apt in relation to questions of person-situation degree and, I think to the impossibility of calculating the relative 'weight' of person-situational factors. If it is, then we might agree here too. I cannot imagine the mobile app appearing that will accurately calculate whether this nurse's poor care, or this CEO's contribution to creating a bullying, thuggish workplace for example, was due to 40% character/integrity/moral failure, 50% to toxic and contributory situational factors and 10% to 'other factors as yet undetermined'. Perhaps Paley will readily accept this impossibility but I fear it may be only as long as in the meantime we all accept that situational factors are the clear leaders of the pack. I don't.

The Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)

I do not dispute at all the key premise that people often judge others' behaviours very differently from their own and often in terms of crude personality assessments. The world is full of knee-jerk reactions and soap-box psychoanalysis and health care is not immune. When we hear comments like, 'What else can you expect, she's a degree nurse', 'Muslim/Jewish/rich/poor/black/white patients are so demanding',

'He's a manager, that's just what they're like', 'Doctors are so arrogant' and more, we should know instantly that we are in true FAE territory, a land where the ignorance of judgments is only matched by the speed at which they uttered.

While I still disagree with Paley that providing ethics, or compassion education for nurses is futile, we should be able to agree that education that problematises and challenges students' thinking regarding personal and professional judgment processes and their potential implications for care would be valuable as would education that acknowledges the systemic, social, organisational and political dimensions of organisational and healthcare culture that impact on every aspect of nursing and care provision.

I have no problem in accepting some of the value of the FAE, but I do still baulk a little at the 'puffery' of the term. There is a disarming special pleading inherent in the phrase and I wonder if it would have caught on so in social psychology if its originators had called it 'The Tentative Attribution Proposition'? We will never know.

Relative evidence

Paley comes at me with the epistemological equivalent of a baseball bat - 90 + references, good grief. It seems that the world of research and evidence must be on the side of the situationists and the FAE. There is certainly a significantly larger body of empirical work exploring the situationist approach to understanding behaviour and its judgment, but no wonder. It is considerably easier to run experiments recruiting some students or other volunteers, (especially when you omit to tell them the 'real purpose' of the experiment), set up what some would consider a quite artificial situation, manipulate some situational variables and then watch as the altered situations affect how people behave (albeit temporarily) (Burger, 1991). Wow. Paley may be right to criticise my calling these 'Gee-Whizz' studies. I think I have been exaggerating. As Kristjánsson observes:

> "We should not labour under the illusion that evidence gathered in this way poses a serious threat to the ideas of character, virtue and virtue education as such" (Kristjánsson, 2013, p. 282).

Situationists cannot use force of numbers to claim that the research case is all in their favour and wondering where the comparable (in size anyway) body of empirical work is on the role and importance of moral character, virtue, or personal integrity. I have no idea how researchers could undertake similar attribution or 'changed behaviour' studies by selectively and temporarily manipulating particular elements of a person's character in order to then observe and attribute any differences to the specific 'piece' of character that was altered.

Mitigating circumstances

Paley devotes entire paragraphs to alerting me to the importance of mitigating circumstances and 'situational pressures that limit responsibility to some extent' (Paley, 2014a, p. 471). He needn't have bothered. I and everyone who is not the most myopic of fundamentalists understands that not all behaviours are morally or culpably equal. Every parent knows that their children's misdemeanours are not identical and that different responses are called for. The judicial system understands that some people who kill may deserve only a light sentence while others should never, ever be released. Nursing and health care has developed the idea of 'just culture' where errors or lapses in care can be openly discussed and where situational and organisation culture issues are emphatically taken into account as opposed to 'routinely blaming staff' (Palmieri and Peterson, 2009). We have no problem in comprehending and judging the difference between a harassed, interrupted, stressed nurse working within an unsafe system making a fatal drug error and a Beverley Allitt (Marks and Richmond, 2008).

In mitigation, perhaps Paley just skipped over the first two pages in my response (Darbyshire, 2014) where I specifically highlighted the situational factors that nurses experience that can lead to their providing less than optimal care despite their best efforts and how patients are perhaps more able that we think to distinguish and to mitigate between the nurse trying her hardest to care in a difficult situation and the nurse who doesn't seem to care at all regardless of the situation. Mole #2. Whack

On 'moral character'

Paley's take on moral character seems to be at the level of 'Character? Whatever THAT means'. He is not alone there and I can understand why. Those dispositional elements such as character, integrity, personal morality all have a quaintly old-fashioned or downright vague ring to them in our current age. I can almost hear their critics demanding irrefutably precise definitions, rafts of empirical studies demonstrating their existence and direct influence on behaviour, or better still a picture of a NMR scan showing a part of the brain coloured red with the caption: 'Your brain when you're doing the right thing'.

In the absence of such categorical indicators of exactly what moral character is, it is tempting to reach for Justice Potter Stewart's famous observation on 'hard core pornography', that:

> "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it" (Gewirtz, 1996, p. 1023).

The reality for most of us is exactly that. We make our way through the world as people; nurses, teachers or whoever, encountering situations and other people every day that require us to engage with them. There are times when these encounters touch our hearts as we see the best of humanity and times when we witness people and their actions that make us question whether humanity has a future. Without overthinking the issue, perhaps we often do know what moral character is when we see it and indeed when we don't.

Cohen and colleagues do try to tease out specific characteristics of moral character, but as with all definitional approaches, this too has its limitations. They propose, based on their body of research, that:

> "What are the characteristics of moral people? Our results indicate that they are considerate of others, good at self-regulation, and value being moral. Specifically, they consider other people's perspectives and feelings and refrain from manipulating others (low Machiavellianism). Moreover, when they do something wrong, they feel guilty about their behavior and change their future behavior accordingly. In general, they can be described as sincere, modest, and fair, as well as disciplined, prudent, and organized. In addition, they are good at resisting temptations and think about future consequences of their behavior. Finally, integrity is important to them and they want to see themselves as possessing moral traits (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 952)

Kristjánsson, a key scholar in moral character and education (Walker et al., 2015; Kristjánsson, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2009), has described '10 myths about character and virtue', not all of which Paley may hold dear. These include; that character is 'old fashioned', 'that it is essentially a religious notion', 'that it is an individualistic notion, 'that it is entirely situation specific' and more (Kristjánsson, 2013). There is a considerable body of recent work suggesting that they are not e.g. (Miller, 2013; Miller, 2014; Fleming, 2006) As (Helzer et al., 2014, p. 1706) found, "contrary to the strong claims of situationists, the study of character appears to be based on solid empirical ground".

The idea that 'moral character' and 'integrity' have been consigned to the dustbin of history by the triumph of situationism would be unfounded and it would be unfortunate if readers were to gain this sense, even