

Divided We Lose

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I can remember a lunch I once had with Leon Festinger. We used to lunch once a week in New York at our favorite Italian restaurant, Il Bambino. Back in those days, one could have a vodka martini and grilled scampi for five bucks. But that wasn't the best part. The best part was hearing and learning from Leon. I have written about those joys for the first issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (the new APS journal due out next month).

In one such lunch, Leon looked at me as I was waxing poetic about something or other and said starkly, "Mike, it is probably the case that not much relates to anything else." He was always skeptical about the synthetic, the integrative interpretation, and yet paradoxically it was what fascinated him. Years later he would lament, as he was closing his lab in visual psychophysics and moving into archeology, "I realized I was learning more and more about less and less."

These are the polar opposites and the tensions that remain alive in psychology today. Every psychology department carries this curse, as does every field of human endeavor. We split, titrate, and specialize as a way of becoming experts on at least something. We then protect that turf as if it was life itself. We frown on the integrative and feel it is sort of for lightweights. Looking at the problem versus looking at the approach to the problem seems to be reserved only for the generalist.

Last month, I moved to the University of California, Santa Barbara which is a place that welcomes interdisciplinary approaches to academic topics. At the same time, I am leaving an institution, Dartmouth College, which also prides itself on this score. The reality is that both are made up of the species *homo academic*, and it remains a constant battle in academic life to remain focused on a problem rather than on the approach. I am about to direct a new center committed to the study of mind at UCSB and the hope is that collaborators from philosophy, biology, psychology, anthropology, computer science, and the humanities will all join in the hunt for a better understanding of mind. Such a cross-disciplinary effort seems more approachable than dissolving the lines of inquiry within the discipline of psychology. This shouldn't be.

Psychology is such an exciting discipline. Under its umbrella come the social process, the individual process, and mechanics of perception, cognition, and development. It has developed a way of looking at all of these issues through an evolutionary perspective in recent years. And, of course, it is now looking at the biological dimension of all of these processes through the eyes of neuroscience. This is something to celebrate and promote. It is not something to dissect and balkanize. The synergies should drive us forward, not impede our mission.

When a bold, interdisciplinary effort is completed, we find extraordinary payoffs, such as Daniel Dennett's new book, *Breaking the Spell*. Dennett takes on no less a topic than the origins, nature, and possible reasons for religions to exist. There is no pussyfooting around here. He synthesizes psychology, evolutionary biology, philosophy, you name it and all in the service of trying to understand how this idea

got going and why it seems to stick. Along the way in his saga, he teaches us that the key question is the lawyer's question, *Chi bono?*, which means "Who benefits from this?" In evolutionary biology, this is the key issue and frequently it is hard to detect.

Dennett, in his singular style, gives a riveting example of just how hard this can be, and the example reveals the power of the interdisciplinary approach. Remember, the book is about how the human predisposition for religious beliefs came about. To get there, the reader must learn some evolutionary principles, and *Chi bono?* is one of them. To place the concept indelibly in your mind, he asks the question: Why do rats sometimes place themselves at risk by showing off in front of cats? Not a smart idea. Well, it turns out rats can pick up a parasite, *toxoplasma gondii*. This parasite can interfere with a rat's nervous system, making it hyperactive. One also needs to know that this parasite can only reproduce in a cat's gut. So the answer is not about the rat or the cat but about the parasite. And one needs to know a lot about several fields to come up with such an analysis.

As we study the mind, complex mechanisms will be common and ubiquitous for sure. Frequently, what we see will not be what we think it is. In order to chase down the true mechanisms, we will need to know many things from many fields of study. If we divide ourselves up into sub-subspecialties, we will never figure things out.

I think Festinger was right on both counts. Skepticism about the larger picture is always healthy and wise, as it calls upon only elements of the intellectual subdivisions in question. Yet his concern about knowing more and more about less and less is equally justified. His two thoughts are bookends. In the large arena that remains in between, it remains for us to move cooperatively, quickly, deftly, and carefully.