Naturalistic Observation of How Psychological Conditions are Depicted

[1] Introduction

In the contemporary world everyone knows that mental health conditions exist and we hear constant references to how such conditions might make people act. In particular, virtually every time someone is reported to have done something that is deemed difficult to explain, the first thing we hear is that they may have been suffering a mental illness.

There are at least two very different reasons why we students of psychology should pause over such tendencies.

- One is the well documented observation that as a general rule people suffering mental health conditions are, on the one hand, significantly *less* likely to act violently (think about why this might be the case); and, on the other hand, that if anyone is likely to be on the receiving end of violence or abuse it's a person with a mental health condition (think, too, about why this might be the case).
- The other is that such explanations are, so to speak, too cheap. They're wonderfully pat and they serve, regardless of what else there is to say about them, to offer neat resolutions to complex problems and, not least, take the rest of us off the hook. We have our seemingly obvious answers—'Why did that person do *that?'* 'Because they were deranged'—even if such an answer means that, in effect, 'There is no answer'. Worse, it leaves questions about what sorts of social, political, economic, sociological, anthropological and historical processes might be at work to produce the kind of world where people feel, at certain points, that they have no better choice for what to do than the one they have taken which has left the rest of us so shaken. So, no need to question anything fundamental about the world we live in—we can safely move on and no one's feathers must be ruffled. Neither we nor the Powers-that-be need concern ourselves about such matters: The problems, whatever they may be, are inside such people, so there's nothing we could do even if we wanted to (except find such folks if we can ahead of time and get them off the streets).

If such considerations weren't enough, consider how often and even how relentlessly the idea is projected that feelings, ideas, statements and behaviors that we don't initially understand—or, perhaps more to the point, don't agree with and don't like—are the outcome of aberrant mental processes. Thus we need not concern ourselves further with them. They may not make sense but they couldn't because they're deranged from the start.

There are, as hinted in the comments above, a large number and variety of things to consider if we are to properly understand why people do certain things, but a place to begin the process is to document how commonly the simple—I will argue, *simplistic*—answer is resorted to.

[2] Protocol

You will need to start by defining what you're looking for. There are a great many ways in which difficult-to-comprehend behaviors (and I include feelings, thoughts and statements in that term for purposes of this project) are dismissed by references to mental illness or other kinds of mental derangement. For instance, do you want to include the idea that the person is 'stupid' or otherwise mentally challenged? There are any number of *bona fide* mental health diagnoses that get bandied about—schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder and multiple personality are, I think, the most commonly used—but what about using terms like 'crazy' and 'insane' that are part of everyday language but generally avoided by mental health professionals?

There are obviously an enormous variety of ways to study this question, so do let your imagination run wild, but once you've worked out the definition you will use it should be clearer where you will look for your examples. Again, the imaginative sky is the limit, but consider these as places to begin:

- Movies and TV shows
- News reports
- Overheard conversations where people are talking about other people

The only important thing for our purposes is to stick with what you choose long enough to be able to make some proper observations.

- You probably don't want to have to watch twenty movies, for instance, but you might want to make a list of movies that have been shown in the last year and see what percent of them used references to mental health conditions to explain what happens in the story presented.

[3] Variants

Don't bite off more than your can reasonably chew, but there are many interesting variants of this project you can consider. For instance

- You might make a table of all the TV shows presented over a 24hr period and make note of what percentage of them mention mental health conditions as possible explanations for whatever it is they are reporting on. Or you might make a table of all the TV shows being presented at different times of day on different channels and make note of what percentage feature such references—and what patterns, if any, you can perceive about when shows that explain unwonted behaviors by reference to mental health conditions are presented. Or you might chart what percentage of news time is taken up with reports that feature such references.
- You might compare different sources of stories or observations that refer to mental health conditions to explain the events reported. How many news shows present stories that feature references to mental health conditions vs how many entertainment shows?

[4] Writing it Up

Once you've made your observations you'll need to write them up.

Start by stating the definition of violence that you used.

Based on the kinds of observations you made, record your results. This is the raw data you will have accumulated and it is usually best to put it into a table.

Explain what you observed in words—what do those raw data show?

Then explain what you conclude about the raw data. What do they show? Dependent on which particular kinds of observations you will have made you will be able to say different things about what your data show, of course, but for this section concentrate on the *patterns* you found.

Next, put your results in the context of psychology.

What is the effect on us of allowing ourselves to use the idea of mental health conditions to explain things that others do or say? What is the effect of allowing ourselves to accept such explanations when they are offered by other people? What differences in how we are affected by hearing such reports are there that are connected with who it is that makes the observation? That is, what's the difference between hearing your friend explain a person's behavior that way, vs hearing your mother do so? Or a police officer? Or a politician? Or a news person? Or an authority or other expert interviewed on TV or radio?

Finally, provide some of your own thinking about the project. What did you learn from it? Which parts, if any, surprised you, and why? Were your expectations confirmed or were you disappointed? If your data were different from what you expected, what might the explanation be? Was your thinking off the mark, or were there sufficient problems with the experimental protocol you created that you weren't able to make accurate observations? What would you change if you were to do it again? What do the data you found suggest about the next round of experiments to do?

Type 1 thinking tends to treat observations as neutral phenomena. Something happens, our minds register it: It's just data and we move on along unchanged by it. But is this really true? Is exposure to a particular way of explaining human behavior just recording what happens, or does it change us? If it changes us, what sorts of changes might occur?