

HADLEY CANTRIL (1906-1969):  
THE TRANSACTIONAL POINT OF VIEW

F. P. KILPATRICK

*University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware*

With the death of Hadley Cantril on May 28, 1969 at the age of 62, psychology lost a scholar who embraced pioneering as a way of life, not because he wanted to be known as a pioneer, but because his quest for increased understanding of human behavior would not let him do otherwise. His extraordinary talent for recognizing new and fertile territory at the frontier, plowing it and demonstrating its productivity, and then moving on, resulted in major contributions in the psychology of propaganda; public opinion research; applications of psychology and psychological research to national policy, international understanding and communication; developmental psychology; the psychology of social movements; measurement and scaling; humanistic psychology; the psychology of perception; and, basic to all of them, the analysis of human behavior from the transactional point of view. According to Cantril, *transaction* is to be differentiated from *interaction*. While the latter posits two entities, the individual and his environment, transaction implies that the two are interdependent: the individual is a creative agent in his perception of the external world, and the environment is a creative agent in shaping an individual's perceptions.

The influence of Cantril's ideas was felt not only in psychology but in education, law, philosophy, politics and psychiatry as well. Those who knew well the man and his writings recognized that each of his interests was the manifestation of a single driving purpose, and that each was pursued in the manner and to the extent that it contributed to that purpose. He was engaged in the constant task of building and refining a point of view and a system which would give ever better understanding of human behavior, not just in the laboratory, but in the full range and subtlety of everyday life, i.e., in what he called "on-going, full-bodied, experience." Within this framework, he constantly pursued the task of abstracting and describing variables, *not as causes* of specific aspects of behavior, but as elements or factors in a complex, dynamic matrix *except for which* human beings would not behave as they do, and he accepted fully

and imaginatively the task of devising means for assessing or measuring these variables in ways which would compromise neither their subtlety nor the complexity of their interdependence.

This, then, was his enduring theme and challenge, and the focus of his great intellectual drive and curiosity. But it was only the major theme. He, like all men, was a part of what he called the "full-bodied orchestration of living" which for him blended into the whole many factors including a deep love and enjoyment of his family, a love of country and a desire to serve it, an almost compulsive need to help further the legitimate aspirations of others, a sensitivity to the loneliness and frequent harshness which results from asking new and difficult questions of one's contemporaries, and a belief in freedom as a necessary condition for individual and social emergence and effectiveness. It is in this context that his contributions can best be understood and accounted for.

*Contributions as a critic.* Critical paragraphs were contained in virtually all of his writings. His targets were many, but his favorites were simplistic explanations, reifications of variables, dualisms, taxonomies, statistical over-refinements, and faddish multiplications of methods-for-methods-sake studies. He feared, he often said, that we would become lost in "proliferating sideways instead of pushing forward."

*Public opinion research.* In 1935, when Cantril read about the surveys being launched and reported in the newspapers by George Gallup, Elmo Roper and Archibald Crossley, he "felt that here was a new instrument the social scientist, particularly the social psychologist, had better look into. The survey technique seemed to hold potentialities for the study of genuine problems, for learning how people look at things, and for understanding better than we did why people of various backgrounds, interests, loyalties, and information levels hold the opinions they do" (17, p. 22). He became the first, or one of the first, to bring the teaching of public opinion research to the college classroom. In 1940 he established the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton and in 1944 published the still widely-used volume *Gauging Public Opinion* (4). The chapter headings have a very modern ring to them and show a strong concern (with which he was not always credited) for methodological rigor.

*Policy research.* Cantril was concerned with "relevance" long before it became the catchword of a youth movement. Throughout his career, he endeavored to bring the insights and tools of social science, particularly opinion research and the transactional point of view to bear on the problems of the nation and the world. His adventures before and during World War II in policy research for Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the use of opinion survey techniques in political and military intelligence and in the postwar international struggle for the minds of men, make up a fascinating drama of successes and disappointments which contain important lessons in this age of increasing pressures on the social sciences for "relevance" (17).

In 1955, he left Princeton University to establish, with Lloyd Free, The Institute for International Social Research under a grant which gave him the freedom and the means to choose and pursue his own intellectual course for the rest of his life. He felt deeply the obligation and the loneliness placed upon him by this freedom. The volume and quality of what he produced during the remaining 14 years more than vindicate the faith placed in him. The eight books and more than two dozen articles he authored or co-authored during that period were devoted to what, for him, was the unitary task of advancing transactionalism, humanism, and individual, national, and international understanding (see esp. 11, 14, 15, 16, 18).

*Humanism and humanistic psychology.* Because of his holistic approach and his conviction that "the outstanding characteristic of man is his capacity to participate in the creation of emergent value attributes which enrich the quality of his experience" (8, p. 159) he never backed away from such value-laden abstractions as faith (21), hope, happiness, surety, aspiration, and the like. Although the term "humanistic psychology" is not new, its current usage stems primarily from a 1955 article by Cantril entitled *Toward a Humanistic Psychology* in which he stated that we must take into account "in any psychology which pretends to be adequate those problems which are common problems to the humanist and the true scientist" (20, p. 279). He saw the conceptual framework of transactional psychology as both the catalyst and the analytic tool for making progress toward a humanistic psychology.

*The transactional point of view.* Transactional psychology is a point of view, not a theory, and Cantril carefully distinguished between the two. A point of view is broader, while a theory is less

inclusive and usually attempts to make precise predictions on the basis of specific assumptions. Within the evolutionary point of view there are various evolutionary theories. Within the transactional point of view are several more or less well developed transactional theories, two of which are briefly presented below. What Cantril meant by transactional psychology, that is, the analysis and description of human behavior from the transactional point of view, is implicit in much of what has been said so far. His own words offer the best explicit summary:

The ultimate goal of psychology is the understanding of human living so that individuals can live more effectively. The psychologist's aim is that of formulating a set of constructs which will enable him conceptually to "understand," "explain," and "predict" the activities and experiences of the functional union we call a behaving person (20, p. 279).

The psychologist interested in understanding the process of living must start from naive experience in the phenomenal area. For only then will he be able to undertake investigations that will disclose the nature of the processes playing a role in behavior which the experiencing individual is taking [into] account. The words "experience" and "behavior" are used here as *interdependent* abstractions man has created, neither of which would be meaningful except for the other (20, p. 279).

If the psychologist is to be faithful to his subject matter, he must always bear in mind that living is an orchestration of on-going processes and that any process he may choose to differentiate out of this aggregate of on-going processes of living can be understood only if it is recognized as referring to a phase of man's orchestrated functioning. It is, for example, a commonplace of philosophical and psychological thinking that "cognitive" and "motor" processes are themselves distinctions that can be misleading unless there is full cognizance of the fact that there can be no "knowing" without "doing," just as there can be no "person" except for an "environment," nothing "subjective" except for what is "objective," nothing "personal" except for what is "social," nothing experienced as existing "out there in its own right" except for the organizations and significances to an individual of the happenings going on in the world around him which he associated with light waves, sound waves, etc. as instruments of explanation (20, p. 280). This does not in the least, of course, imply that we turn our backs on the results of rigid scientific experimentation (20, p. 281).

*Transactional perceptual theory.* In 1947, Cantril met and began to work closely with Adelbert Ames, Jr., a leading authority in physiological optics, whose experiments and demonstrations showed not only that man is an active participant in the construction of what he "sees," but also revealed many of the variables "except for which" the processes involved in the creation of one's perceptual world would not occur as they do. Shortly others were attracted to this work, and transactional perceptual theory and research began to develop rapidly.

Stated briefly, the theory suggests that perception can best be conceived of and treated as process. It further proposes that there is never one and only one thing which "must be there" in order to

account for a pattern of stimulation on the organism; that any pattern of stimulation, no matter how complex, is necessarily ambiguous with respect to its referent. The resolution of the ambiguity is a learned response. Thus perceiving is primarily a learned activity of the organism. "Stored feedback," generally originating in actions and their consequences as they are registered in relation to our motives or purposes, is instrumental in the construction of what we perceive. Thus, the perceptual organization of the moment cannot be an absolute revelation of "what is," but is instead a sort of "best bet" based on past experience. This "best bet" based on the consequences of past dealings with the environment is reflected in awareness as perceiving, and serves as a directive for further dealings with the environment. Consequently, we are motivated and behave in terms of the world as we perceive it, and the world as we perceive it is in large part a product of our past motivations and behavior and our present purposes.

*Transactional neurological theory.* Early in the development of transactional psychology and especially transactional perceptual theory, one of our major concerns was that many of the processes postulated had no known correlates in neurological processes; as a matter of fact, much of the neurological evidence suggested rather forcefully that we were on the wrong track. Some examples are: (a) the functional organization into definite tracts and nuclei that characterize the arrangement of the sensory and motor systems of classical neurology lacked "transactional" components; (b) evidence was lacking for postulated central modulation, based on experience, feeling and purpose, of sensory systems at relay stations and at the periphery; (c) evidence was lacking for a pervasive positive-negative feeling-state system which would attach a valence "of a kind and in a degree" to behavior as experienced (in Cantril's words, "the value quality of experience").

Thus, it was with great excitement that Cantril witnessed over the last decade and a half the emergence of new neurological evidence based primarily on techniques for studying the activity of the conscious brain by the use of implanted micro-electrodes: (a) The reticular formation, once thought to be mainly excelsior-like padding for the known sensory and motor systems, is being found to possess all the functional attributes of a central transactional core. (b) Evidence now indicates that the brain can "police" its own input;

that the cortex can modulate activity in and through the reticular formation, and at all points clear out to the sensory receptors. (c) Two "affective" systems, which can be characterized as generally positive and generally negative, have been identified in the brain, and seem to form the mechanisms for the directional feeling-states associated with experience. Cantril took account in his writings of the significance for psychology of these developments (22, 23), and in the last months before his death he wrote in a major article on the subject: "Contemporary neurological and psychological disciplines are converging toward simpler, more holistic views" (24, p. 6).

Cantril often expressed his fascination with "becoming," with the "on-going changes exhibited by all forms of life in their progress from birth, through growth and maturation, to old age and death" (22, p. 3). Certainly his "becoming" was directional and emergent. It is appropriate that he was writing a chapter on "change" when the final interruption to his work occurred.

Hadley Cantril was born in Hiram, Utah in 1906 and received his BS from Dartmouth College in 1928 and his PhD from Harvard in 1931 after graduate study at the Universities of Munich and Berlin. He was awarded honorary degrees from Dartmouth and Washington and Lee University. He began his career as an instructor at Dartmouth and two decades later was Stuart Professor of Psychology and chairman of the Department of Psychology at Princeton University. He was a founding member of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, past president of the Eastern Psychological Association, and was awarded the American Association of Public Opinion Research award for distinguished achievement. In 1935, Dr. Cantril left Princeton University to become chairman of the board of the Institute for International Social Research, a position he occupied until his death in May of this year. He is survived by his wife, Mavis L. Cantril, two children, Albert H. Cantril and Mrs. Donald C. Jansky, and his sister, Mrs. Warren B. Walsh.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

All of Dr. Cantril's books are listed, but of his more than 100 articles, only those referred to in the text are listed.

##### *Books*

1. with G. W. ALLPORT. *The psychology of radio*. New York: Harper, 1935.
2. with HAZEL GAUDET & HERTA HERZOG. *The invasion from Mars*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univer. Press, 1940.

3. *The psychology of social movements*. New York: Wiley, 1941.
4. *Gauging public opinion*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univer. Press, 1944.
5. with M. SHERIF. *The psychology of ego-involvements*. New York: Wiley, 1947.
6. *Understanding man's social behavior*. Princeton, N. J.: Office Publ. Opin. Res., 1947.
7. (Ed.) *Tensions that cause wars*. Urbana, Ill.: Univer. Illinois Press, 1950.
8. *The "why" of man's experience*. New York: Macmillan, 1950.
9. (Ed.) *Public opinion 1935-1946*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univer. Press, 1951.
10. with W. BUCHANAN. *How nations see each other*. Urbana, Ill.: Univer. Illinois Press, 1953.
11. *The politics of despair*. New York: Basic Books, 1958.
12. with C. H. BUMSTEAD. *Reflections on the human venture*. New York: New York Univer. Press, 1960.
13. (Ed.) *The morning notes of Adelbert Ames, Jr.* New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univer. Press, 1960.
14. *Soviet leaders and mastery over man*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univer. Press, 1960.
15. *Human nature and political systems*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univer. Press, 1961.
16. *The pattern of human concerns*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univer. Press, 1965.
17. *The human dimension: experiences in policy research*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univer. Press, 1967.
18. with L. A. FREE. *The political beliefs of Americans*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univer. Press, 1967.
19. with A. H. HASTORF. *Transactional psychology: a point of view about man*. Uncompleted, unpublished manuscript.

#### Articles

20. Toward a humanistic psychology. *Etc.: Rev. gen. Seman.* 1955, 7(4), 278-298.
21. The nature of faith. *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1957, 13, 24-37.
22. with W. K. LIVINGSTON. The concept of transaction in psychology and neurology. *J. Indiv. Psychol.* 1963, 19, 3-16.
23. Sentio, ergo sum: "motivation" reconsidered. *J. Psychol.*, 1967, 65, 91-107.
24. with W. K. LIVINGSTON & R. B. LIVINGSTON. Brain, mind, and self. Unpublished paper.