Psychology and Mennonite Studies

Bill W. Dick, University of Waterloo

I. Introduction

Before addressing the topic of what impact modern psychology has had on Mennonite life and practice, it may be important to give a basic definition of psychology and to spell out my definition and orientation within the broad and multi-faceted realms of psychological study and research.

Psychology in its broadest terms may be defined as the study of human thought and action. More specifically, in the context of other social sciences, psychology seeks to elucidate the causal relationships between thought and deed, between act and consequence of the human organism. Functionally psychology is what psychologists do. I wish to simultaneously focus and broaden this latter definition to also include the applied fields of social work, pastoral psychology and other more general social science orientations.

Furthermore, in presenting this review of Mennonite studies in the context of psychologically oriented research, I would like to begin by declaring some of my biases. My orientation is that of a practitioner of psychology, who has worked mainly in a secular societal context, though with a deep conviction that the best of psychological insights can be applied to Mennonite life and practice.

As one identified with the profession of psychology I must confess some degree of embarrassment about the manner in which my profession on the one hand has gone about its study of human behaviour. On the other hand, I am also often embarrassed by the ways in which members of society in general and members of the Mennonite community in particular have often with a minimum of critical discernment absorbed and incorporated many psychological theories into everyday use.

The limitations and distortions of psychology in describing the human condition are cogently addressed by the psychologist Rollo May.
in a fantasy which he relates at the beginning of his treatise on *Psychology and the Human Dilemma.*

In the fantasy, a psychologist arrives at the heavenly gates at the end of his long and productive life. He is brought up before St. Peter for the customary accounting. In looking over the psychologist's credentials for admission into the state of eternal bliss, St. Peter begins to frown. Fearing that he might be rejected, the psychologist opens his briefcase and cries: "Here! The reprints of my hundred and thirty two papers."

St. Peter slowly shakes his head.

Burrowing deeper into the briefcase, the psychologist offers, "Let me submit the medals I received for my scientific achievement."

With unabated frown St. Peter declares, "I'm aware my good man, how industrious you were. It's not sloth you're accused of. Nor is it unscientific behaviour."

"Well, I must confess," admits the psychologist with a fine show of ethical frankness, "I did twist the data a bit on my Ph.D. research."

But St. Peter will not be placated. "No, it's not immorality that's down on this document. You're as ethical as the next man. Nor am I accusing you of being a behaviourist, or an existentialist or a Rogerian. Those are only minor sins. You are charged with nimis simplicandum (oversimplifying). You have spent your whole life making molehills out of mountains!"

Another psychologist, Paul Vitz, in his *Psychology as Self-worship,* makes a good case for the possibility of the various brands of self-psychology as becoming alternate belief systems for many people in our day. To what extent this has actually occurred within Mennonite circles is difficult to ascertain.

It has become quite popular to use psychology with varying degrees of appropriateness to express basic Christian beliefs. A good example of this can be found in a recent editorial in *The Mennonite,* in which the psychology-trained editor, Bernie Wiebe, very fittingly uses the basic concepts of client-centred counselling theory, namely unconditional regard, acceptance and love, to describe God's covenant with his human family.

In this paper, I shall attempt to review relevant psychological research with Mennonite subjects as well as to reflect on the ways in which psychological thinking has positively impacted on Mennonite life and practice. Then I shall attempt to make some future projections, suggesting ways in which psychological insights can be used to elucidate or enrich distinctive Mennonite beliefs and practices.

II. *Psychological Research and Mennonite Studies*

In a review of the literature, there is a dearth of reported psychological research on Mennonites. A number of reasons could be suggested for
this paucity and I shall attempt to give a few. Many of the psychologically trained professionals working in areas of high Mennonite concentration are functioning as clinicians and not researchers. No doubt many have observed certain patterns of psychological functioning within certain Mennonite groups, but for a variety of reasons have not chosen to publish such findings. The main reason for not publicly sharing their observations centres around the confidential nature of their clinical work. Another reason could be that on many variables of psychological or personality functioning, Mennonites as a group would not appear to be essentially different from the rest of society.

One recent attempt to relate religious affiliations with psychiatric diagnoses has been undertaken by C. B. MacDonald in the Department of Education and Pastoral Services of the Oaklawn Psychiatric Center, a Mennonite sponsored Mental Health Center located at Elkhart, Indiana.4 The psychiatric profile presented for the Mennonite Church of the Brethren-Amish sub-group shows a higher than average percentage of diagnoses in the following categories: depressive, obsessive, compulsive, adjustment reaction to adult life, passive aggressive and marital maladjustment (listed in rank order of frequency).

While one might raise various questions as to the validity of this kind of empirical descriptive research, the findings tend to point to difficulties in the handling of so-called negative feelings (e. g. anger, hostility) on the part of this sub-group which is strongly committed to an expression of positive feelings (e. g. love and peace).

As part of his doctoral study in pastoral psychology, David W. Augsburger explored the relationship between high nonviolent/non-resistant values and the management of hostility with a sample of 414 subjects randomly selected from ten paired Mennonite church communities in the state of Ohio.5 Significant affirmations emerge from the empirical data in support of the teaching and practice of nonresistance as a functional behavioural style. There is a clear correlation between the aggressive behavioural profiles of the Mennonite community and the ethical-theological values as taught and practised. Assault and verbal hostility have been consistently forbidden among these people. Augsburger's findings indicate a consistently low incidence of such behaviours within the community under study, in contrast to the published norms of the broader American population.

With such a low incidence of physical and verbal aggressive behaviour, Augsburger expected to find a correspondingly high increase in the overall profiles of passive aggression, namely negativism, resentment, suspicion and indirect hostility. Surprisingly this was not generally borne out in the findings, except for a small but significant sub-sample
However, he did find a consistently lower incidence of negativism and of over-controlled hostility among Mennonite women as compared to the males. This seems to indicate that the women in this sample tend to manage their aggressive and hostile behaviours in more functional ways and with less stress than do males. He further feels safe to infer from these and other indices that Mennonite males need liberation and growth to a greater extent than Mennonite females.

On the basis of these and other related findings, Augsburger makes some significant recommendations which I shall now summarize. He suggests that more effective models are needed to clarify: 1) ways of releasing and resolving feelings and convictions of personal guilt; 2) ways of owning and experiencing the full range of emotions, feelings and affective states; 3) ways of integrating nonresistant values with assertive-confrontative statements of personal needs and purposes. He suggests that further research is needed to define ways of more creative management of indirect hostility, negativism, resentment, suspicion and irritability without the high incidence of guilt.

Augsburger concludes that the Anabaptist-Mennonite personality with its dominant-loving tendencies can also affirm the other polarities of confrontative, assertive behaviour and dependent, submissive responses, thus making for greater wholeness in personhood and community life.

By way of critique, I contend that this research represents a significant beginning into an area pregnant with many other psychological research possibilities in Mennonite studies. This could include a replication of Augsburger's study in various Canadian Mennonite communities employing other research methodologies, along with the limited and often subjective paper and pencil questionnaires that he used exclusively.

In the sixties Irmgard Thiessen reported her preliminary research findings on the values and personality characteristics of Mennonites in Manitoba. Her research suggests that Mennonites, when compared with non-Mennonites, exhibit a higher awareness of guilt, threat of authority, need to defer to authority, uneasiness in a non-Mennonite society, and apparent suppression of sex. According to some of the Mennonite leaders in Manitoba, this study provided helpful insights to mental health practitioners involved in this particular cultural milieu.

Another study with a social psychological bent was conducted by Bruce Hunsberger. He used a questionnaire designed to measure religious attitudes and behaviour in order to compare those Mennonite young people attending church-sponsored colleges with those attending secular universities. He also compared Mennonite college students with those of Protestant and Catholic background. In general his findings did not indicate that Mennonite students attending church-related institu-
tions have a stronger ideological commitment than do their counterparts attending secular universities. All that Hunsberger could candidly conclude from his findings was that Mennonite students seem to practice religion more and choose more friends from their religious orientation as compared to the Mennonite students attending secular universities.

Ralph Lebold, currently president of the Mennonite-affiliated Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo, has developed and implemented an evaluation process to be used with pastors and members of their respective congregations. He has drawn many valuable insights from psychological theories used in organizational management. His model is described as adopting a confessional rather than a judgemental stance and builds in flexibility to tailor the tools and methods used in each evaluation process to the needs and goals of the respective pastoral leader and congregation. This model encourages growth and openness for both pastor and people by its low-key, non-threatening approach.

The above review of research studies of a psychological nature is indeed an indication of how little has been done in the way of psychological research in the area of Mennonite studies.

III. Indirect Contributions of Psychology-Oriented Movements and Writings to Mennonite Life and Practice.

Without wanting to claim too much credit for the influence of psychology, but rather wanting to give credit to those who have drawn on psychological insights and practices in effective and creative ways, I would like to review briefly some of the relevant movements and popular writings with a strong psychological orientation that have emerged out of the Mennonite brotherhood in recent years.

A. The Mennonite Mental Health Movement

The January 1982 issue of the Mennonite Quarterly Review is almost entirely devoted to a review of the Mennonite Mental Health Movement. The emergence of eight Mental Health Centres under Mennonite sponsorship since the Second World War is in itself a remarkable achievement for a relatively small ethnic group.

Elmer Ediger, administrator of the Prairie View Mental Health Center, comments that often secular mental health professionals have challenged Mennonites to draw on and apply important aspects of their spiritual heritage in these mental health centres, namely: 1) the Christian respect for personhood; 2) the emphasis on love, brotherhood and community; 3) the practice of reconciliation and nonviolence; 4) the emphasis on discipleship, simply doing the best you can for someone in need.

Credit must be given to countless psychologically trained professionals of various stripes and paraprofessionals related to these mental health centres who have made and continue to make valiant and creative
attempts to serve those in need from a holistic orientation, integrating their psychological insights with their spiritual heritage.

Only one of these centres operating under the Mennonite Mental Health Services umbrella is located in Canada, namely the Eden Mental Health Centre at Winkler, Manitoba. After a recent visit and interviews with a number of the professionals at this centre, I came away with the distinct impression that the staff are doing a creditable job in ministering to the overall mental health needs of the people in this community noted for its high concentration of Mennonites.

Continued efforts are being made by professionals working under the Mennonite Health Services umbrella to develop new strategies which will strengthen the preventative and holistic nature of mental health services.

Currently a number of us in Ontario are attempting to develop a multi-faceted service model with a holistic orientation but without the mental health label. This has come under Mennonite Central Committee (Ont.) sponsorship and has adopted the label of Shalom Counselling Services. It remains to be seen how effective and relevant this venture will be in its attempts to integrate the best of what modern psychology has to offer with the spiritual heritage of the Mennonite/Anabaptist vision.

In a highly provocative article on Mennonite approaches to mental health, Al Dueck, professor of psychology at Fresno Pacific College, explores a variety of strategies that Mennonites could adopt in dealing with the complexities of the modern mental health systems. He concludes by suggesting that Mennonite mental health leaders might continue to explore fruitfully a number of themes that arise directly out of Mennonite control beliefs as follows: 1) pluralism, 2) voluntarism, 3) discipleship, 4) Covenant, 5) Priesthood of all believers.10

B. Two other movements within Mennonitism relating to high priority needs in our society.

1) Strengthening of marriage and family life and dealing with marriage breakdown. Whereas in the past Mennonites have generally adopted a rather rigid and often legalistic stance toward marriage and family life, in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of a variety of movements usually with a strong psychological orientation to encourage more openness and growth in marriage and family relationships. These developments have assumed various labels such as marriage enrichment programs and family life consultations. Very often Mennonite leaders in this area have uncritically adopted or borrowed from existing models either taken from other church denominations (e. g. Marriage Encounter) or from secular counsellors. I believe there is a need to develop models that will provide a more wholesome integration between what psychology has to offer and our unique spiritual heritage.
In recent years, the Mennonite church has also been forced to deal with the growing incidence of marriage and family breakdown within the ranks of its membership. Generally there has been a shift away from a judgemental legalistic orientation to one of empathic understanding and positive, redemptive support. One example of this latter kind of approach may be seen in the set of guidelines for pastors in dealing redemptively with marriage breakdown, recently adopted by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. Furthermore it has been suggested that Mennonites, out of their concern for reconciliation, might have something to contribute (and also learn from) the growing divorce mediation movement as an alternate to the adversary approach of the traditional legal system. It is my contention that basic psychotherapeutic insights have helped to influence Mennonites in these new directions.

2) Dealing with offenders and victims in our society. In recent years Mennonites have given positive, creative leadership in dealing in more redemptive and reconciliatory ways with legal offenders and their victims in our society. This can be demonstrated by a number of programs sponsored by various MCC constituencies such as the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program or the Community Mediation Service. In every case the professionals involved have represented a social work or psychology orientation. Much more could be written to document the positive effects of such programs. In my judgement, Mennonites are making a very positive contribution in this vital area of human need.

C. Relevant Popular Writings by Mennonite Authors

While the writings of several Mennonite authors could be reviewed, I shall deliberately restrict myself to the published works of David W. Augsburger, professor of pastoral care at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana. In my estimation he has dealt with a number of areas central to distinctive Mennonite basic beliefs in a highly integrated psychological and theological manner.

In Cherishable Love and Marriage and The Love Fight: Caring Enough To Confront, Augsburger addresses interpersonal issues particularly focussed on the enhancing of marital relationships. In the latter book, he tackles what seems to be a major Mennonite avoidance technique, i.e. not to openly confront contentious issues or negative feelings in the interests of “keeping the peace.” Another version of avoidance is total submission, expressed in the German saying: Ganz wie du willst, Liebling, nur Friede!

In Anger and Assertiveness in Pastoral Care, Augsburger applies insights from three major streams of psychotherapy (Gestalt-existential, psychoanalytic and learning theory) to a variety of commonly encountered situations in congregational living. He suggests practical approaches for both pastors and people to convert wasted and often
destructive human energies into creative forces that can lead to greater wholeness for the individual and the community.

In *Beyond Assertiveness* Augsburger, collaborating with psychiatrist John Faul, provides a crucial balance to the one-sided individualistic and self-centred emphases in most assertiveness training programs by introducing the need for affirmative caring and profound sharing to be integrated with an open self-assertion.

In his most recent booklet on true and false kinds of forgiveness, *Caring Enough to Forgive and Caring Enough Not to Forgive*, Augsburger presents the basic principles involved in the multi-faceted experience of human forgiveness, using popular psychological language supported by biblical examples in each case.

It is difficult if not impossible to assess the impact of Augsburger's writings both within and beyond Mennonite circles to date. This in itself could represent a challenging and valuable research exploration relevant to Mennonite studies.

IV. Future Projections of Needed Psychological Research Explorations Relevant to Mennonite Life and Practice

A. Searching for a Viable Model for relating distinctive Mennonite beliefs and psychology.

First of all, I would suggest that Mennonite theologians and social science professionals concerned about furthering research in this area, join ranks with other "religious" professionals of whatever stripe in the common struggle for truth and light. One such organization is the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) which has just published the first issue of its professional quarterly journal, *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity.*

Further, I sense the need for a basic commitment on the part of Mennonite theologians and professionals to work toward the highest possible integration between distinctive Mennonite convictions and psychology. This imperative is rooted in our basic belief that God is the Lord of all creation and that consequently there exists a fundamental unity of truth.

While I am calling for an integrative stance, I am fully aware of a strong tradition among Mennonites to take a clear-cut dualistic position based on convictions that the separation and even antipathy between church and world must be upheld. Perhaps some elements of an ongoing non-conformist witness are needed to guard against a naive, uncritical acceptance of secular ideologies and practices.

Of all attempts to establish a case for an integrative model, perhaps the most informed treatment of this contentious issue, is presented by
Carter and Narramore of the Rosemead Graduate School of Professional Psychology. They begin by looking at the various other options along the lines of H. Richard Niebuhr’s analysis of the history of relations between Christianity and civilization. They conclude by not only portraying possible ways of relating various concepts or subject areas of theology and psychology but they also make a plea for paying attention to the process of integration. They suggest that for fallible human beings to achieve an effective integration between these two fields of study, it will call for at least three personal characteristics to be exercised by all concerned, namely: 1) An attitude of humility to be open to the views of others and to new ways of looking at human behaviour; 2) An ability to tolerate ambiguity in the face of apparent contradictions and seemingly unresolvable dilemmas; 3) The need to maintain a balance between cognitive and affective styles of expression.

In the search for a viable model of integration that upholds the primacy of biblical revelation, I find myself drawn toward the one held by Maurice Martin, Mennonite pastor in the Toronto area, in his recent book Identity and Faith. His approach is to identify the various dimensions of Christian faith and then use the social sciences in general or psychology in particular as helpful tools in transforming faith into real life and action. For instance in defining a believer’s growth toward maturity, he draws on the life stages approach of Erik Erikson.

In the past few years, a wealth of research and writing in the area of adult development has emerged that is shedding further light on the process of adult maturity. A particularly fascinating schema of adult development is that proposed by Daniel J. Levinson in his book The Seasons of a Man’s Life. The importance of these fairly new psychological insights can help Mennonites as individuals to understand, accept and cope more effectively with their own personal transitions at various stages in the process of natural human development.

B. Applying Psychological Research to Mennonite Life and Practice.

Psychological Research can be helpful in defining the dimensions of wholesome Mennonite life and practice at the various levels of human functioning: intrapsychic, interpersonal, familial, community, and societal. Actually this is where a broader inter-disciplinary social science and humanities approach would be more helpful than a narrowly psychological one.

To clarify and corroborate the strong emphasis within Mennonitism to affirm the value and dignity of personhood, I believe that the client-centred approach of Carl Rogers has stood the test of time. His theory of the self-actualizing tendency of persons rests on the three necessary but sufficient conditions for a growth-promoting climate between persons, namely: 1) genuineness 2) unconditional positive regard and 3) empathet-
ic understanding. Narrowly conceived, this orientation can lead to an enhancement of a narcissistic individualism or even self-worship.

Along with the respect for personhood, Mennonites have stressed the importance of brotherhood (peoplehood) and community. As a psychological analog to these concepts, two significant emphases have emerged in recent years: a) the systems approach in marriage and family therapy; b) the holistic health movement which has a strong interdisciplinary social science and medical orientation. These new perspectives can also provide a helpful counterbalance to more individualistic approaches like client-centred or Gestalt therapy.

C. The Newest Vistas from the Social Sciences for Mennonite Life and Practice.

The strong Mennonite emphasis on discipleship can gain support from research efforts in applied psychology to translate abstract theory into practical action at all levels of human existence.

Marilyn Ferguson uses the concept of transformation to define the personal and social changes taking place in our society. She refers to the intentionally induced triggers of transformative experiences as psychotechnologies.

In reviewing some of these psychotechnologies we are confronted by a veritable smorgasbord of methodologies, some developed and practiced within the mainstream of psychology and others coming from a variety of sources, including Eastern religions. This is where a critical testing of the spirits would be appropriate. However, one may view many of these psychotechnologies as avenues that God has placed at our disposal to help us make the experience of discipleship in Christ more profound and real in our time.

While to some these psychotechnologies may conjure up images of Orwell’s 1984, I believe that in the future our people will take the meaning of discipleship as individuals and as a community even more seriously and radically than in the past. Although it may seem contradictory, I would hope that this seriousness could be coupled with a relaxed and joyful spirit. My vision would provide individuals, families, congregations and church institutional groupings of our people with periodic “wellness” or “wholeness” check-ups. But these opportunities for serious self and group analysis and appraisal would be supported by an offer to enter into a transformative process, thus going beyond idealistic talk and translated into real life experience at all levels of human functioning. Some of this is already happening in many different ways as it pertains to individuals who are concerned about their intrapsychic and interpersonal wellbeing. It is also happening in some of our congregations and other sub-groups within our church. The kind of process that Ralph Lebold used in his evaluation of pastoral leaders and con-
gregations is a step in that direction. The Mennonite congregations who have thus far become involved in this process with their respective pastors report signs of renewed vitality and reveal a sense of greater authenticity in actualizing the Anabaptist vision of being and becoming faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

In order to implement this kind of vision, I believe we can begin modestly by using existing structures within the church and gradually developing new ones as needed. The thrust of such a movement would not be that of having expert professionals or authoritarian leaders making diagnostic judgements, but rather it would issue from a genuine mutual caring and sharing in the context of a loving community of committed believers. One rather intriguing model for implementing such a vision is that of the Holistic Health Center concept in which a team of three professionals representing the pastoral, medical and helping areas work together, usually operating from a church building. Although this model may not fit every context it does offer one example of a comprehensive, holistic and integrated approach for dealing with human suffering.

**Conclusion**

Modern psychology and distinctive Mennonite beliefs and practices share much common ground in their respective foci on various aspects of human behaviour. Thus there is the potential for conflict and competition between the two systems. In reviewing the literature on psychologically related research, writing and activity relevant to Mennonite life and practice and in projecting future directions, I have tried to make a case for an integrative stance to the greatest extent possible. This approach affirms the essential validity of distinctive Mennonite beliefs and practices based on biblical revelation. In addition it encourages an open yet critical exploration and application of psychological theory and practice to help enlighten and transform Mennonite beliefs into higher levels of concrete reality and practical expression.

In my view Jesus in his life and teachings portrays and symbolizes some of the most fundamental psychological insights. These were valid and a propos for his time. From my faith perspective emerging out of both my personal and professional experience, modern psychology in many respects has borne out the fundamental truth of Jesus’ wisdom whether it be seen as human or divine. Above all, I believe that modern psychology at its best when applied with care and discernment to the plethora of human situations confronting mankind with all of their complexity, can help Mennonite and other Christians put into practice more effectively what living the Christ-like life means, thus fulfilling Jesus’ words: “By their fruits ye shall know them.”
Notes

21 Ibid., especially Chapter 4, *Crossover: People Changing*, p. 85.