A FURTHER WORD ON LIKERT-SCALES INSPIRED BY "RULES OF RIGHTNESS"

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ABSTRACT

This brief commentary treats Polanyi's newly found lecture, "Rules of Rightness," as an occasion to revisit some earlier claims I made about the use of rating scales in social science research. It serves as something of an interim report on an ongoing inquiry into what an effective response to social science would look like from a Polanyian perspective
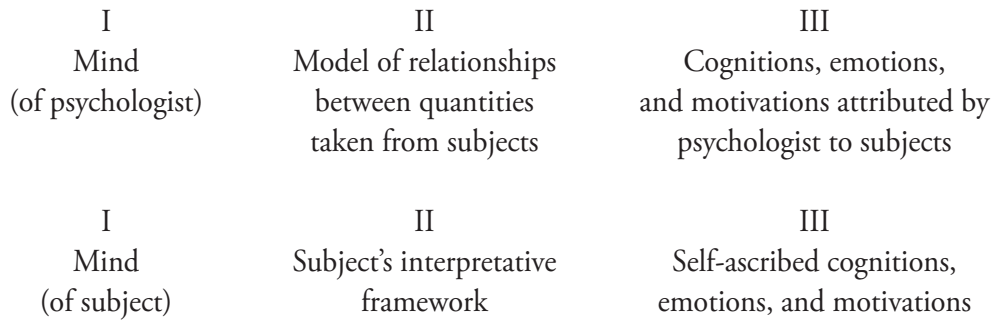
> "When we choose a theory or a method, are we choosing something momentous, like a self, or something innocuous, like an 'intellectual construct' or 'conceptual scheme'? or something depersonalized, like 'a series of logically consistent, interconnected, and empirically verifiable propositions,' or like 'a generalized statement of interrelationships of a set of variables'?"
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> Sheldon Wolin, *Political Theory as a Vocation* (1969, p. 1075)[1]

Likert-scales are used in psychological tests and any kind of polling device that seeks to translate our attitudes and feelings into numerical values that can be operated on with statistics. For example, the statement "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others" appears on a widely used psychological measure of self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965). An individual is typically asked to report his level of agreement with the statement on a 1-to-4 scale where 4 means "Strongly agree" and 1 means "Strongly disagree." Following Polanyi's lead (*PK*, 16), I called this act of translating statements of indeterminate meaning into numbers a *pseudo-substitution* in an article published early last year (Barnes 2022a). My interest in "Rules of Rightness" stems from its bearing on that decision.

While such a substitution purports to advance our understanding of others, I argued before that it primarily serves an objectivist epistemology and scientistic world picture. It does this in two ways: 1) by distilling the intrinsically indefinite and personal—i.e., the very words we speak (*PK*, 79-80)—down to a supposedly definite and impersonal number and 2) by overshadowing the respondent's sense of the world with the psychologist's own. This overshadowing is reflected in the simple fact that the psychologist will go

on to *model* the collected data, but the respondent will not—and not merely because he lacks the technical training to do so. He has no idea what "modeling" means, the commitments it entails, or whether he agrees with the implications these commitments have for his life.[2] The three-part diagram Polanyi presents in his lecture, "Rules of Rightness," and improves upon in *PK* (262) pictures what I mean. I included a modification of it in my article (Barnes 2022a, 15). It appears again below for convenience.

I	II	III
Mind (of psychologist)	Model of relationships between quantities taken from subjects	Cognitions, emotions, and motivations attributed by psychologist to subjects

I	II	III
Mind (of subject)	Subject's interpretative framework	Self-ascribed cognitions, emotions, and motivations

In this diagram, we could just as well substitute the term "social scientist" for "psychologist," so I will use these interchangeably in what follows. The two are hardly separable, and Likert-scales are used in sociology, political science, and economics just as they are in psychology. Further, it should be noted that while Likert-scales are the focus here, they actually serve as metaphors for everything that transpires in these fields. The method is not an isolable feature of social science. It grew up within social science's borders and is interwoven with and reflective of all the thought forms and practices of social science, albeit some (e.g., operationalization, experimentation, measurement, etc.) more obviously than others (e.g., ethnographies, interviews, etc.).

Polanyi notes that when a psychologist accredits to his subject a healthy mind possessing all the powers for believing and knowing that he takes for granted in himself, he places the subject on par with himself as an actual or potential equal (*PK* 263, 346). When the psychologist builds his model—not infrequently using quantities taken from Likert-scales—and makes sense of his subjects' conduct in light of it, he privileges the positivistic commitments implicit in his methods over whatever framework holds his subjects' allegiances. If the subject deliberately submits to the psychologist's reading of his life, that is one thing, but having now spent years studying and teaching psychology to undergraduates, I find that it is hardly clear whether researchers have any scruples about this. They readily admit that life can (and should) be lived outside the authority of such unfalsifiable systems as orthodox psychoanalysis, but they do not recognize how the same could be said about their own position.

All of this means that, already from the start, research involving Likert-scales entails some degree of failure to engage subjects on their own terms. We might, therefore, suppose that authentically understanding them necessitates jettisoning the method altogether. But is this acceptable? Who is prepared to say that survey numbers and the statistical regimens they are tied to do not expand our comprehension of human experience? Do we not call mathematics a "language," and do we not sometimes find phrases in foreign tongues that help us express ideas in new and revealing ways? Why should psychologists' reliance on Likert-scales not be understood like this? Even Polanyi recognizes the immense value of formalized knowledge. This is evident in "Rules of Rightness." Think, for instance, of the aerial map in Air Force Command. Without translating the coordinates of enemy and ally aircrafts into a two-dimensional visual space, the events transpiring in the

sky would be virtually invisible to the officers charged with securing victory. Could it not be asserted that the surveyor of public opinion or the psychologist in his lab is only offering us something like this—namely, a window into the numerical associations between attitude variables that would otherwise be obscure and without which a practical grip on social and psychological problems remains elusive?

When I recall that the subject is a real or potential equal to the social scientist who is at liberty (albeit a hazardous liberty) to live life independent of the latter's conceptions of it, I hesitate to give these questions much credence—all the more when I reappreciate that the numbers in Likert-scales carry the same indeterminacy as the words they are meant to improve upon. These numbers are, essentially, *just other words*.[3] It is easy to forget this—to be seduced by the pseudo-substitution—because numbers give us the impression of clarity and certitude. They tempt us into thinking that the social scientist is doing something fundamentally more precise and therefore better than the novelist, historian, biographer, or journalist—all of whom evidently deal in words. But nothing magical happens when the number 4 is substituted for the phrase "Strongly agree." Certainly, there is no magic that warrants the former's reification and use in equations that, *save for the participation of the researcher*, pays no respect to the personal origins of word meanings, their context and nuance.

It is only the researcher's sensitivity to these features of language that may imbue her interpretation of Likert-ratings with any gradations of meaning. The ratings do not carry the meaning. They ignore it, and there is no guarantee that the researcher possesses the requisite sensitivity to do the imbuing. After all, her training has mainly required the skillful use of methods and statistics, not the close readings of texts or, unless she is a therapist, careful listening. Worse still, she does not (or only rarely) actually speaks to her respondents outside the strictures of her meticulously crafted protocol. Virtually every experiment and questionnaire administered under the auspices of social psychology confirm this. This means that whatever sense of nuance the researcher brings to the table, it has not been informed by the wider lives of those she investigates, but only by a "literature" that suffers from the same myopia. We must conclude, then, that if numbers are blind to nuance and the researcher herself is little prepared to appreciate it, the line above that says, "save for the participation of the researcher," offers little reassurance that social scientists' elaborate analyses of Likert-ratings permits the understanding of much beyond their own way of thinking.[4]

Contrast this with a series of YouTube videos I recently discovered in which philosopher Peter Boghossian travels to college campuses across the country and asks small groups of students to situate themselves on a Likert-like scale he has drawn on a sidewalk.[5] There are seven taped lines on the ground, and he clarifies that the extreme marks at the ends express either "Strong agreement" or "Strong disagreement" with some provocative statement such as, "The only way to remedy past discrimination is present discrimination"—a line he says comes from a rather controversial figure (at least for some), Ibram X. Kendi. The other lines of the continuum express agreement, slight agreement, or their opposites. The middle mark expresses neutrality. After putting these statements to students, he counts down from five. By the time he hits one, students are supposed to have positioned themselves somewhere on the scale. But what happens next is unlike anything one finds in large swaths of, at least, psychological research, and it is quite simple. A conversation ensues. Students discover they do not understand the meaning of certain words in the statement or they think, for instance, that "discrimination" entails one thing when, for Boghossian, it includes another. In the course of the exchange, students are free to move about on the scale as they realize new things or reconsider old, and they do—sometimes more than once. Because these videos are for public consumption and must hold viewers' attention, however, they last only about fourteen minutes; Boghossian has a number of people

to talk to as well, so no single student gets his undivided attention. One gets the distinct feeling after the exercise is over that the only thing Boghossian and his students have successfully touched on in every individual case is the tip of the iceberg. More movement along the scale is easy to imagine. Indeed, is it ever final? In this, Boghossian offers us a simple illustration of what could happen with virtually every Likert-scale item ever administered for research purposes, but it does not happen.

Of course, we can make too much of nuance. Boghossian's exercise, after all, has a pedagogical intent. Day to day, it seems we get along pretty well when we disattend to the penumbra of meaning surrounding our words. What difficulty would the cashier face if he made a habit of wondering what his customer really meant when ordering "Number 1" from the menu? Why should we proceed differently in social science? But one only has to dwell on the *mis*interpretations that daily confound our ordinary lives to see why this is inadvisable. Meaning frequently *is* missed, even with those we know well. Moreover, if we are honest, we even have trouble understanding ourselves. Given social scientists' extensive reliance on rating scales, however, one would think that they see no problems in this, or few of any importance. As a result, they make much of quantities I firmly believe do not and cannot carry the burden of meaning they wish to place on them. And because I count this meaning to be of vastly greater importance than any superficial and pseudo-substitutive mathematization of it, I find social scientists' willingness to proceed with Likert-scales anyway, and to the extent that they do, odd—even absurd.

What, then, is the social scientist to do who wants to understand people? How ought he approach the problem? If one does not see how or in what way a careful study of, for instance, John Wesley's sermons teaches us more about the lives of devoted Protestants than survey studies of the same (e.g., Mirels & Garrett 1971), it is doubtful that any answers I give to these questions will be satisfactory. Nevertheless, if there is a method implied in such "careful" studies, perhaps it is akin to those of the humanities, anthropology, or other disciplines. But even to look for a method is already to get embroiled in the problems of social science. Why is it that Polanyi never permits himself to worry with such questions? Is it because he is doing philosophy? Doubtful. I rather think it is because he is teaching us what place such questions should have in our own thinking. For him, as for us, method must always be seen as an expression of (and secondary to) persons. This is why I somewhat regret suggesting in my earlier essay that Polanyi points the way to a "reimagining" of social psychology (Barnes 2022a, 16). This implies that I am in search of a new methodology. I am not.[6]

Within Polanyi's thought we find ample clues to ways of speaking and thinking about social science that align it more with modes of human interaction (e.g., apprenticeships; *PK*, 52) already (or once) familiar to us and that openly accept the personal rather than attempt to hide it behind techniques. Indeed, I suspect that following these clues culminates in a fundamental return to the ordinary lives and relationships we already indwell or could indwell if we felt called to do so. It is more than a suspicion, actually. Polanyi clearly says that his thought is an invitation to us to "contemplate…a picture of things restored to their fairly obvious nature" (*PK*, 381). And in "Rules of Rightness," Polanyi writes, "It is only by *conversing* with the responsible core of a fellow person that we come to know it personally" (p. 9 in this issue of *TAD*, emphasis added). There are few activities more at home with ordinary human affairs than conversation, and we should remember that it is frequently the medium by which persons learn to get along in life, gain insight into others, and experience conviviality. This is why I appealed to education in my earlier paper. It pictures to us a form of relationship that, when appreciated in its broadest sense, touches every human relationship.

Tellingly, Sigmund Koch speaks of his work with the Aesthetics Research Center at Duke University similarly. He called upon novelists, poets, and other artists to meet with him and talk individually for several hours about their creative endeavors. He selected as discussants "mature artists of high caliber" (Koch 1999a, 44)—those generally recognized as being at or near the top of their vocations (e.g., Arthur Miller, Toni Morrison). Implicit in their perceptual capacities, Koch believed, was a *theory* of creativity that could be drawn out through careful engagement and, at least partially, made explicit (Koch 1999b). That is what he hoped to elucidate in his research, but for our present purposes what is most impressive is how Koch describes these exchanges. There were no surveys, no Likert-scales. There were not even interviews—the favored term of social scientists who perform qualitative rather than quantitative research. What was there, then? As if channeling Polanyi, Koch says there were "*conversations*" (Koch 1999a, 45). He goes even further. The artists he met with were "not 'subjects' who responded," he says, "but collaborators who conversed" (ibid.). These "collaborations" were a "pilgrim's progress" (47) in which the very concept of researcher was also irrelevant: "I conducted myself as a *person*," he says, "not a psychologist in this work" (48).

I have not had a chance to review the footage of these exchanges, though I have requested access to it. Boston University's library, where the footage is archived, is understaffed and is unable to assist me at this time. Nevertheless, enough is revealed by Koch's comments to say that his encounters have strong affinities with the kind of relationships I wish to underscore. Through them he saw what was vital in the creative process of different artists, and he, in turn, challenged these artists to see and articulate more than they, perhaps, thought they were capable of. He was drawn up into their world, and, one supposes, they gained a clearer perception of their own activities through him. Although I do not wish to be misunderstood by invoking the word "education" here—I mean it, again, in the broadest possible sense and with an eye toward a relationship rather than a methodology—overtones of the dialectic between mentor and apprentice are clear. That the learning did not unfold in a classroom or lecture hall is beside the point. And that the "results" of such research are not predictive in any strict sense is too. Fundamentally, I agree with Koch (1999a): "Whether [the results] be specifically allocatable to a 'discipline' called psychology, or to some composite area for which there is no standard name in the map of scholarship is of little moment" (43). What does matter is the "humanly important 'phenomena'" (ibid.) the results attempt to reveal and the form of relationship that makes their discovery possible.

All of this hardly says enough about the matter, but it is all I can manage at this time. I recognize that my comments reiterate more than add to what I have said before—and that they throw little light on "Rules of Rightness" as a lecture all its own. But sometimes reiteration is enough. I would, however, like to append a caveat in conclusion. What I have said might suggest to the reader that I believe Polanyi would have us listen to and understand everyone, or that this is somehow the ideal. I do not believe this. Polanyi does not indulge the skeptic (*PK*, 315), nor does he feel compelled to understand the Azande on their terms (ibid., 294). The presumption that we can and should understand everyone, or that this is a prerequisite to standing our ground—if we are ever to do so—contains more than a hint of the objectivist ideal. Empathy is not a bottomless well, and it can become an idol like anything else. I, and I believe Polanyi too, endorse the more perilous and existentially demanding mode of discerning *whether* one is called to empathize or not. The "either/or" nature of this statement is surely discomfiting to those who prefer a "both/and" approach to life. But for my part, such a picture misrepresents the human struggle entirely. The question is not between "either/or" and "both/and," as if life could be lived well by excluding one, but is about *judging* when the one is called for over the other. Pretending such decisions are hazardless is no good.

Bringing this to bear on the matter at hand compels us to admit the following. When social scientists proceed anyway with their rating scales despite grounds for seeing them as pseudo-substitutions, they show us where they have (responsibly, one hopes) decided to terminate their understanding. They do so at the risk of missing their subjects' experience but at the gain of preserving the system to which they are, perhaps without fully appreciating it, committed (Barnes, 2022b). In continuing to insist that Likert-scales, as used by social scientists, are pseudo-substitutions, I am doing the same with respect to their position.[7] This breakdown of communication is necessary because, in response to the question raised in the epigraph, I feel sure that something momentous is at stake.

ENDNOTES

[1]I wish to thank Jon Fennell for turning me on to this very important article by Wolin and for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

[2]The social scientist put off by this observation might sardonically ask, "What, must the respondent be given the opportunity to consider these commitments in the Informed Consent process?" Authentically judging the commitments of social science requires nothing remotely achievable by "Informed Consent." The present essay (and the one it builds on) attempts to break out of social science proper, but this question tries to prevent it from doing so by showing how silly its implications are for existing social science practice. As a result, it misses the point entirely.

[3]The reverse of this (i.e., words are, or might as well be, numbers) is a form of reductionism. However subtle and unexamined, it too is part of the faith that holds numbers and word meanings together for social scientists (Barnes 2022a, 15).

[4]On the other hand, even if we are fortunate enough to have an appropriately sensitive researcher at the helm of data analysis, recalling that his numbers are, again, just other words makes it unclear how the interpretations he offers are essentially different from those of any well-intentioned historian, journalist, or other humanist who looks at a body of evidence and derives a fitting generalization from it. The statistical apparatus he relies on no more guarantees the believability of his generalizations than the tools a carpenter relies on proves the value of his work. A chair is not a better chair *because* its builder used a screwdriver; neither is a generalization better *because* its author computed an average and tested it with inferential methods. What matters, instead, is the person behind the work and whether we, as persons ourselves, are prepared to follow his lead.

[5]"Kendipalooza #1: The Only Remedy to Past Discrimination is Present Discrimination," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWcuGs-R6QI&t=26s

[6]Rather, I am after "something like repentance" (Lewis 1944/2001, 78).

[7]Reminiscent of the detractor who tells Polanyi, "You can believe what you like" (PK, 256), it is obvious that the social scientist could say to me, "You are called to one thing. I am called to another." Polanyi's response to the former is my response to the latter: "[S]o be it" (ibid.). When two callings are as divergent as those pictured here, one must confess that it is possible to be mistaken. But I do not believe I am.

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