

## Chapter 9

### Psychology of Fear

Although I was excited by the implications of what I had discovered about quantum physics, I realised that not everyone felt the same. Those who seemed most reluctant to talk about what the findings might mean were often physicists themselves. After talking to some of them in considerable depth, I came to the conclusion that what held them back was fear. They had psychological difficulty taking on board the implications; it was as though if they did, it would threaten the security of their total belief system. Consequently, they stayed with the way of knowing that was familiar to them; and maintained a belief that further discoveries would identify the 'errors' that had been made, enabling them to return to the established assumptions. I suggest that fear is a powerful force that adversely affects the development of ways of knowing which support the full flourishing of creative and meaningful possibilities.

Mansfield asks why conventional scientists look sceptically, even scornfully, on phenomena that challenge their existing world view, even in areas where there is strong empirical evidence to support the challenge.

This is a complex question, but some of their resistance is simply built into science. There is always a good bit of healthy scepticism in science toward anything controversial, especially something as far-reaching in its implications. However, that on its own hardly explains the conventional resistance. Surely a large part of it must come from the realisation, if only partly conscious, that the reality of these phenomena seriously challenges many of the fundamental presuppositions underlying modern science. No scientist wants his or her worldview turned upside down, especially if it's done by using the tools of science. (Mansfield 1992: 220)

Dean Radin, when exploring the same issue, suggests that:

The answer is contained in the odd fact that we do not perceive the world as it is, but as we wish it to be. We know this through decades of conventional research in perception, cognition, decision making, intuitive judgment, and memory. Essentially, we construct mental models of a world that reflect our expectations, biases, and desires, a world that is comfortable for our egos, that does not threaten our beliefs, and that is consistent, stable and coherent.

In other words, our minds are "story generators" that create mental simulations of what is really out there. These models inevitably perpetuate distortions, because what we perceive is influenced by the hidden persuasions of ideas, memory, motivation, and expectations. (Radin 1997: 229)

An understanding of cognitive dissonance may be relevant when considering why many scientists are so reluctant to accept the possibility of subjective experience and consciousness being causal factors for what happens in the world. Social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957)

introduced cognitive dissonance as a psychological state which occurs when evidence is produced which is incompatible with a currently held belief. Cognitive dissonance theory states that when dissonance occurs the situation can be resolved by either discarding the new evidence or discarding the old belief. A critical aspect of cognitive dissonance theory is that the contradictory evidence must be credible, otherwise it could be rejected without further thought. Once dissonance is created, the discomfort is so great, people are highly motivated to resolve it.

There are two alternative courses of action. The first is to abandon the original way of seeing things; the second is to disregard the conflicting information. The individual will tend towards the solution that is easiest to manage. If the dissonance is sufficiently strong, and is not reduced in some way, the uncomfortable feeling can develop into anger, fear and even hostility. According to Aronson (1969), the amount of dissonance a person can experience is directly proportional to the effort they have invested in their behaviour. When there is extreme discomfort, and the person feels unable to adapt to the different way of seeing things, they may respond by making disparaging comments about those who represent the different opinion. This can be seen when scientists make negative comments about ideas and opinions which they do not think meet the stringent standards of proper scientific research.

However, Mansfield does not believe that any of this provides a satisfactory explanation as to why there is such a resistance to evidence that challenges a materialistic perspective. Responses to cognitive dissonance are descriptive, rather than explanatory. It may be that the reasons are rooted in much deeper psychological forces than have so far been discovered. In being asked to create a model of the world that is radically different to the one we have been accustomed to, we are being asked to give up the security of that which we know well; and to venture into the unknown and the unfamiliar. What would it feel like to be forcibly taken to an alien country, about whose culture we know nothing, and which may potentially contain all kinds of unpleasant, even horrific experiences? Facing the complete unknown can be a fearful experience, which we will seek to avoid at all costs.

In this context, it is worth exploring the role of fear in our lives. Dorothy Rowe starts her book, *Beyond Fear*, with the following words:

This book is about a secret. It is a secret which all of us, men and women, children and adults, the powerful and the weak, the happy and the unhappy, conspire to keep. It is a secret which we keep from one another, it is a secret we keep from ourselves. The secret is fear.

We can admit to all sorts of things about ourselves – that we don't like talking about death, that some things make us anxious, that we worry a lot – but we try never to say, even to ourselves, 'I am afraid'.

Fear is too fearful to be discussed. We talk about what we do to protect ourselves from our fear – we worry about practical things or unlikely eventualities, or we work hard, or become bad-tempered or extremely powerful, or we cling tenaciously to some religious or political faith, or we drink too much, or become ill or depressed, and so on – but we do not talk about the total, annihilating terror we feel whenever we as much as glimpse our own insignificance, vulnerability, helplessness, isolation, weakness and fragility in this limitless, incomprehensible cosmos.

So much of what we do, and all the theories we have created about why we do what we do, are defences against this fear, but the fear itself is not acknowledged. ....So

many of the theories about what we do to defend against the unnamed and unacknowledged fear have to do with behaviour which is a problem, such as being addicted to drugs .... 'Sane' behaviour is not seen as being a defence against the unacknowledged fear. Yet it is, for every moment of the day each of us is engaged in creating, maintaining and defending a structure which we call 'myself, my life, my world'. Continual defence is necessary, for the ever-moving, ever-changing cosmos can reveal to us at any moment that our precious structures are as fragile as a matchstick house, and can be swept away like matchsticks in a stream.

.....We insist that our perception of ourself, our life and our world is the only true reality. Threats to our structures usually come when other people insist that their constructions are the correct ones. A power struggle ensues, and the winner is the person who makes his structure prevail. (Rowe 1987:11-12)

Dorothy Rowe is a clinical psychologist, whose writings include numerous case studies of people she has worked with in therapy, as well as records of conversations with others whom she has interviewed as a means of learning more about how they come to perceive life in the way they do (e.g. 1978, 1987, 1989, 1991). She then analyses the relationship between the beliefs individuals have developed, and the quality and nature of their day-to-day experiences.

Rowe's writings are underpinned by a theoretical framework rooted in a 'social construction of reality'; she believes that individuals develop their own constructs about what constitutes reality, and interpret everything that happens to them within those constructs. In *Beyond Fear*, she explores in depth the nature of the connection between people's adherence to the constructs they have developed about critical aspects of their lives. This operates as a means of keeping existential fear at bay, which can arise when an individual feels in a place of insecurity or uncertainty.

Science as a profession has developed its own constructs of reality, which are reflected in the assumptions that underpin their scientific world view, and in the methods they use to investigate their perception of reality. Because their constructs include a belief in the superiority of their own methods of gaining knowledge; and because their core assumptions deny the significance of emotions and feeling in understanding the truth about life; they are not likely to consider that psychology has relevance for them. A tendency to see all aspects of their inner world as emerging from the brain and hence being ultimately illusory, does not encourage a perception of emotional intelligence as having significance; that is, they will not consider it important to be aware of and deal appropriately with feelings in themselves and others.

However, scientists are human beings too. Their education and training does not make them immune from the same kind of emotions as others – including that of fear. As Rowe suggests, one of the ways that people manage fear is to build constructs that provide them with security.

The fragility of our structures is always a cause for fear. ...Every day, we have to find an optimum balance between freedom and security. We cannot have both. The more free we are, the less secure; and the more secure, the less free. (Rowe 1987: 14)

One of the main reasons that many scientists may find it difficult to question their own assumptions regarding, for example, the primacy of the material, with all aspects of personal, subjective experience being derivatives of the material, is because it would require a radical change in their construction of reality. They may gain security from the beliefs and methods which have historically driven their professional activities, and result in evidence based

knowledge. They may feel safe in a world which is knowable and controllable, governed by immutable laws. Discovering that the world is, in fact essentially more uncertain, may offer exciting creative possibilities, and a freedom from artificial boundaries they have placed on their own potential; but it also means being confronted with the unknown.

The main difficulty in exploring and assimilating the wide ranging implications of quantum physics into mainstream science may lie more in the psychological problems which individual scientists, whose world view is founded on the assumptions of scientism, will experience in facing this challenge, rather than the capacity of their intelligence to make the shift. It would also require them to acknowledge that their traditional view of the world is too limited, and that other disciplines, such as psychology, may offer complementary information about the world that needs to be valued and legitimated. Given that the physical sciences have long viewed their methods of gaining knowledge as being supreme, it will take some courage to accept that perhaps they have been mistaken.

The courageous person does not deny fear, but acknowledges it and faces it. Only through courage can we find a sustaining happiness. (ibid: 15)

The role of fear in inhibiting human potential and creativity, and how fear could be overcome, was an issue that would be re-visited at various times during my enquiry. At this point, though, I wanted to explore in more depth what was meant by the word 'consciousness', and what was emerging from a growing discipline entitled a 'science of consciousness'.