

# CONCEPTUALISING EXPERIENCE

The Basis for Development of any Human Science

Dr. Warren Kinston  
The **SIGMA** Centre,  
29 Netherhall Gdns, London NW3 5RL

## Sections

Introducing Experience

Recognizing Experience

Expressing Experience

Representing Experience

Mastering Experience

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## 1. INTRODUCING EXPERIENCE

- 1.1** Science needs to encompass the human element. This human element is **experience**. Often the human element is referred to as 'consciousness' (but what is conscious is miniscule) or 'mind' (which is vague). These terms seem to refer variously to the sum total of experiences or to the capacity to have experience or to the awareness of experience or to a hypothetical entity, which contains locates or undergoes experience. Some writers equate mind/experience/consciousness with the self.
- 1.2** The features of experience are precisely those that bedevil all the social sciences. Claims that scientific work is impeded by the inherent nature of the object of study are common. Without explaining why, the object of study is often said to be:
- fluid, changing, changeable, complex, complicated, subtle and irreducible
  - capable of endless further interpretation or elaboration
  - based in the first person, incorporating meaning or providing significance to life
  - requiring the sensitivity of a human observer to be noted
  - altered by investigation or articulation
  - not the same for the spontaneous participant as for an observer.

**These properties are simply the characteristics of human experience.**

- 1.3** Many oppose conceptualizing experience. Existentialists claim concepts destroy life or substitute for life. Positivists claim inner life does not exist or cannot be studied. The modern tendency is to find the basis of experience in parts of the brain or neuronal firing or to argue about the relation between mind and body, without first unambiguously and unequivocally conceptualizing experience /mind.
- 1.4** **The core ideas** required to move forward with what experience is about are the following:
- experience exists and can be referred to directly or labeled using words (ie terms, names, concepts);
  - in regard to experience, words can be used in a limited defined way to ensure common understanding (i.e. scientifically) or in a private diffuse way to generate experience (i.e. symbolically);
  - for clarity (which is essential if social cooperation is relevant) and for scientific progress, experiential names require to be used systematically and consistently. This is only possible if the names are linked by direct reference to actual experiencing;
  - aligning the *logical meaning* and the *felt meaning* of experiential terms enables development of a science of common sense which can be understood and used easily by ordinary people in everyday life;
  - experience needs to be divided up for study into the domains of human functioning e.g. deciding, inquiring, communicating, purposing etc.

These assumptions have been pursued for some decades in *The SIGMA Project*. (**SIGMA** is an acronym of Systematizing Imagination to support Goals, Management & Action.) The result has been the discovery of an underlying structure in the mind. This structure has been elaborated as related frameworks that not only map functioning but enable it to be ethical and far more effective.

## 2. RECOGNIZING EXPERIENCE

- 2.1 Experience is a continuous inner process of human beings (possibly all living systems). It is part of the natural world-but sometimes it is differentiated from physical realities and called the inner world.
- 2.2 Experience is a concrete phenomenon, not an abstraction, which can be referred to directly-just like the physical world.
- 2.3 Experience is massive and only a small part can be focused upon or given attention at any time. Only a small fraction of this small part is ever explicated: most remains implicit or hidden. Again, like the physical world.
- 2.4 Experience is generated by human interaction with the world i.e. by perception and action. Because experience is part of the world, it is self-generating.
- 2.5 Experiential fundamentals of complex felt states include: sensations, images, emotions, ideas, intuitions, identifications and the imagination—as well as combinations or compounds of these. All may be referred to as 'feelings'.

## 3. EXPRESSING EXPERIENCE

- 3.1 **Symbolization** is a mental (brain-based) mechanism for the outer (public) expression of experience via things called symbols.
  - 3.11 **Symbols** (in the above sense) may be sounds, marks, words, action, shapes, situations &c-anything that performs the function of marking off or specifying a feeling and so makes our attention to it possible.
  - 3.12 Symbols may refer directly to experience, may represent experience or may creatively form new experience.
  - 3.13 **Words are by far the** most important symbols because they are the basis for reflection and rational inquiry.
  - 3.14 Experiencing is incomplete without symbols, but it may be indicated by direct reference without precise specification e.g. "I can't describe what I'm feeling now." "There is something important missing."
- 3.2 **Meaning** is symbolized experience i.e. it is formed in the interaction of experiencing and something that functions as a symbol.
  - 3.21 Meaning has 2 dimensions: the felt meaning and the logical meaning. These dimensions are most easily noted when one or the other is missing.
  - 3.22 Meaning is itself an experience, and feed-back may alter or enlarge the original experience. As a result, the most minor and brief matter can produce an infinity of associations.
  - 3.23 Meaning is created when a relation is formed between an as-yet-unsymbolized experience and symbols that usually indicate something else.
- 3.3 There are a variety of methods for symbolizing experience or creating meaning: The most important is **direct reference**-a person calls attention via a symbol (e.g. pointed finger, words) to some particular as-yet-undescribed or indescribable felt meaning.
  - 3.31 In **recognition**, a person uses symbols to represent or conceptualize a felt meaning.

3.32 In **explication**, a person uses a symbol to call forth a felt meaning and then selects further symbols that others recognize.

3.33 In **metaphor**, symbols are used to evoke an experience.

3.34 In **illustration**, experiences are used to suggest exact symbolizations.

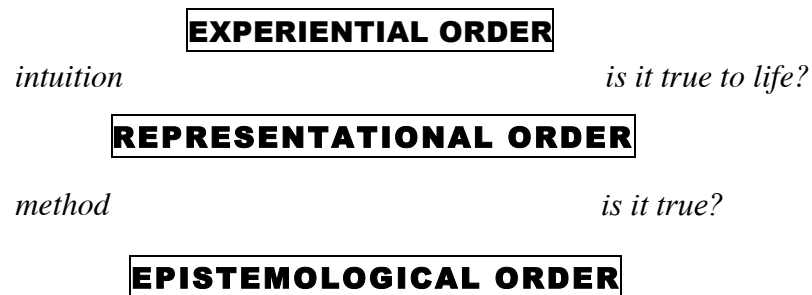
3.35 In **contextualization**, a core felt meaning, often called the underlying meaning or central theme, is developed from a context.

It is essential to distinguish between the experience itself and its expression (i.e. the representation or reference to the experience).

#### 4. REPRESENTING EXPERIENCE

4.1 **Names** are socially determined symbols in the form of words (or terms), which enable representation of the world. As part of inquiry, a concept must be empirically validated, have value attributed, be capable of generalization and form relations with other concepts.

4.2 Scientific research involves testing representations for truth and therefore requires criteria for truth as defined by epistemologies and various methods that suit those epistemologies. There are therefore three distinct orders of discourse:



4.3 The need to link the representational and epistemological order was the pre-occupation of thinkers in the 17th-19th centuries. The key concern this century has been the link between the experiential/ meaningful order and the representational/conceptual order.

4.4 Logical concepts and experience are in constant interaction. Concepts can expand the range of experiencing, and experiencing can change the use of a concept.

Often it is argued that meaning lies in the one and is distorted by the other:  
Artists/existentialists favour meaning. Rationalists favour logic.

4.5 Logical meaning (articulated concepts) should follow felt meaning if experience is to be adequately conceptualized.

4.51 Names (ie concepts) which are not meaningful (i.e. which do not link to our experience) are not usable in practice. We say we do not have a feel for the idea/concept or do not really understand what is being referred to by the word.

4.52 Names which are not logical (i.e. which are inconsistent, incoherent, or mean different things at different times) tend to impede social achievement because people become confused, misunderstand each other and talk at cross-purposes.

- 4.6 Names used in daily thinking by ordinary people are not scientific. They are undefined words, which connote widely and carry private implications rather than denoting in a logical, public, and univocal fashion. Because they contain and generate many felt meanings, they change from moment to moment or situation to situation.

Loose or woolly concepts may be satisfactory in many situations but they remain logically indefensible and are liable to generate hostility. When many people are involved or when values must be worked with, clarity of communications is a prime requirement.

- 4.7 Creating meaningful and logical concepts is the basis for constructive research in the human sciences. Simultaneously appealing to intuition and applying rationality demands a research process of collaborative inquiry and validation through practical use.

4.71 Cramping felt meaning to fit some concept is scientism rather than science. Proposing a meaning that feels right but is incoherent or inconsistent leads to pseudo-science.

4.72 Much science uses abstractions (variables) that have no direct link with experiential reality, seem like jargon, and do not and cannot make sense to people. This is normal science in the humanities – but it is a mockery of true science.

- 4.8 **SIGMA** research commonly proceeds by identifying experiential entities via direct reference, using a concept for it that is in common use or is easily recognized by people. The concept is defined precisely in terms of function, and then its properties are discovered in dialogue by recognition, comparison, analogizing, contextualization, explication, illustration, and application.

## 5. MASTERING EXPERIENCE

- 5.1 Human beings currently manage their inner experience poorly. Science is about mastery. So a science of experience opens the possibility of self- mastery and communal self-discipline.
- 5.2 A science of experience must first divide experience into relevant domains. The domains of experience deal with the various forms of human functioning, and experiential and socio-cultural entities devised to support that functioning.
- 5.3 The primary domain identified in **SIGMA** research is the domain of will and creation. Within it are domains of action, inquiry, language, purpose etc. Within the domain of language are the domains of work: e.g. familial, organizational, academic, societal, philosophical and spiritual. And so on.
- 5.4 Work over many years has led to the discovery of an underlying structure 'in the mind'. This structure has been elaborated as related frameworks, which not only map the particular domain of functioning but enable it to be harnessed ethically and effectively.

**End Note:** Many have influenced my thinking on this topic, but the painstaking work and thinking of Eugene Gendlin, a person rarely referenced, is acknowledged with gratitude.