

Romantic Sciences: The Need of the Hour

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Now, more than ever, there is a need for scientists to view humans as he exists in his habitat and appreciate the intricacies of the experiences within and possibly quantify them when examining the not-so-simple mechanisms of the mind. Such an attempt had been made decades ago by Alexander Luria and later Oliver Sacks. 'The Man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales' was penned by Oliver Sacks in 1985 [1]. It presented a series of fantastic cases of patients with neurological deficits. The book is divided into four parts. Each part deals with a certain theme that brings out the complex functioning of human brain.

Oliver Sacks (1933 - 2015) referred to as 'poet laureate of the medicine' by New York Times was a neurologist by profession. His book saw mental disabilities from a romantic perspective. The selection of cases was intelligent on Sacks' part since they emphasized philosophical insight as much as factual knowledge hence, touching upon the delicacy of human nature that's often not dictated by the hard and fast rules of neurology. The use of word 'tales' in the title of the book and the narrative style of Sacks hint toward his literary soul which generally the world sees in opposition to science (but not in Sacks' eyes). In his own words as quoted by Pauranik [2], 'I had a scientific impulse to write articles in journals and also the literary urge to write narrative stories. There was initially some conflict in my brain about two distinct instincts, which were located in different parts, gradually they came together.....Story telling is an essential part of medicine. It helps you understand the physiology of a person'.

Dr. Sacks, in the wake of Luria, brought together two distinct, opposing fields of arts and science together putting forth the idea that strict adherence to science may lead to faulty understanding of human nature which after all, is not as simple and straightforward as often portrayed by scientific understanding. The cases discussed in his book presented the conflicts: romantic science versus classical science, concrete versus abstract, narrative mode versus schematic mode, right hemisphere versus left hemisphere and lastly, spirit versus intellect.

Sacks' approach: Romantic science vs. classical science

Alexander Luria, known as the father of neuropsychology, during last years of his life presented a crisis in psychology wherein the fallacy of classical psychologist was brought to light. Classical scholars according to Luria [3] view events in terms of their components. They pick out bits and pieces from the whole until they can form abstract laws. In contrast to classical scholars, romantic scholars do not adopt a reductionist approach, 'it is of the utmost importance to romantics to preserve the wealth of living reality, and they aspire to a science that retains this richness' (p. 173). Absolute adherence to one field would cause unsatisfactory results. Therefore, Luria sought to combine them.

The consideration of subjectivity and uniqueness of the experiential history of the patient in understanding the neurological deficits comes under the domain of romantic science. The overlapping region in the figure 1 constitutes romantic science.

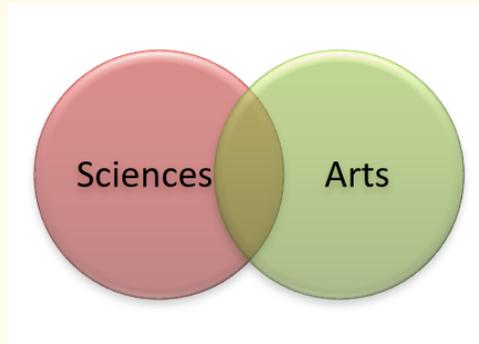


Figure 1: Presents the overlapping territory of the inductive science and expressive arts in understanding human neurology.

Alexander Luria sought to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches and rightly so. Similarly, Sacks adopted romantic science approaches as did Luria. As per Sacks' claims, classical neurology in collaboration with cognitive science views dysfunctions within brain as objectively analyzable. The neural pathways involved in the deficits are highlighted to provide a logical explanation. At the same instance, Sacks was interested in knowing the subjective experience of the disorder by the patient himself. It is this experience that makes the disorder different for every individual in the way the patient views it, narrates it to others, adapts to it and deals with it. Commonly, the physical state is overemphasized in studying the neurological deficit while the mental state of the patient is neglected. Sacks did not, in any way, negate the significance and application of neurology. He simply pointed out the vacuum in the field which hinders the adequate treatment of the client. He endeavored to broaden the horizons of neurology by incorporating elements of phenomenology. Sacks' work dealt with patients, who having lost a primary neurological function, compensate the deficit by means of higher order consciousness. Sacks claimed no divine propensity to know inner functioning of any patient. Rather, being an astute observer, Sacks relied on the data obtained from the observable behavior, listened closely and interpreted the patient's communication of the loss h/she had suffered from [4].

Recent times require adoption of romantic science to study human behavior. Scientists have drawn implications from Luria's approach to devise interventions [5]. However, time and time again, the focus is lost. Lamdan and Yanitsky ([6], p. 3) said that in the light of Luria's ideas, it is of utmost importance 'not to miss the relatively less known and underdeveloped, yet possibly equally promising opportunities that it offers to contemporary scholars. One needs to understand that this is not a "fossilized" intellectual construct, but a dynamic system of thought, "pregnant" with exciting possibilities of further theoretical, practical and applied development'.

Therefore, a scientist must remind himself perpetually to not get lost in the concrete, quantifiable notions and ignore the very essence of human existence. It is counterproductive to presume that humans can be defined in numbers. Man is one of the biggest mysteries of the universe. His true understanding requires an attitude of openness and experimentation while relying on qualitative and quantitative data both. Luria and Sacks made great strides with their insights and have lit paths for many to come [7].

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