Mental mapping project kicks off in Japan

What would a map of every single human idea look like? Darryl Macer, associate professor at the Institute of Biological Sciences at Tsukuba University in Japan, unveiled a preliminary model at the 8th International Tsukuba Bioethics Roundtable meeting (Feb 15–18, 2003). Macer advocates the creation of a human mental map to illustrate the diversity of ideas both within and between cultures and to help bioethics policy making by taking into account these differences. A map could help individuals solve moral dilemmas, says Macer, by allowing them to visualise and consider all their ideas.

The first model of the “behaviourome”, as Macer calls it, is a box, each side of which is a grid. One side of the box is labelled “memories”, the opposite side “hopes”, the top is “love of others”, and the bottom “self love”: the front and back of the box are “loving life” and “love of good”. The box itself represents the totality of ideas with each point on the grid representing one idea. The placement of ideas within the box depends on their relation to the concepts represented by the six sides. The box contains strings of multicoloured lights, each one representing a chain of ideas.

In addition, Macer has divided ideas into nine categories: conceptualisation of physical objects; psychological meanings of images associated with objects, like colours; memories; plans for both short-term and long-term future; intention to modify behaviour of self; intention to modify behaviour of surrounding people and the environment; processing of sensory states; inhibition of responses based on immediate evolutionary benefit; and interactive conceptualisation of ideas in a community-based response. In his model, each type of idea would be represented by a different colour, hence the multicoloured string of lights.

To explain his model, Macer used the example of a woman facing the dilemma of whether or not to have an abortion. Many things would go through her mind: on the one hand, she might feel that it would be better for the fetus to be born, an idea that could be mapped close to the “love of others” side of the box. On the other hand, she might remember her own unhappy childhood, an idea that could be mapped close to the “memories” side. Her individual ideas could be linked to form a strand which could then be compared with strands formed by the ideas of other individuals facing a similar dilemma.

At the beginning of the conference, Macer called for a discussion on how to proceed to the next step of his project and make his model a reality. However, conference participants were more concerned with the pros and cons of trying to create such a map. The diverse, international group of professors, medical doctors, students, and scientists had varied opinions, but none supported the project without reservation. Some suggested that the ‘mental map has too much pretension. It pretends to reflect all the ideas there are, pretends to be democratic, and that’s what it’s not. There will always be someone who will be creating the categories and choosing which ideas will be used’, she said. Several participants, however, expressed support for Macer’s attempt, whether it ultimately succeeds or not, as a heuristic tool allowing people to clarify their ideas. Others suggested that limiting the map to specific situations might create a practical tool for resolving certain moral dilemmas.

Macer brought the conference to a close saying that despite the difficulty involved in making a human mental map, the attempt was worthwhile. “We have to find a new paradigm... if you just stay with your current methodologies and disciplines, I would challenge those people that you’ll be sitting around with the same old ideas. We have to create new ideas”, he said.

Kim Akashi