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Trends. When Science Isn't Science: The Political Psychology of Policy on Children

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Title: Trends. When Science Isn't Science: The Political Psychology of Policy on Children

Author: Editor

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One myth of science comprises the latter's objectivity, insistence on reliable and valid notions of Truth, and separation from social and cultural values. It is old news that various schools and perspectives on the philosophy of science have devastatingly exploded and imploded these mythic components--sometimes to unhelpful extremes. Yet purveyors of problematic objectivity, Truth, and at least an attempt to approach value-free science persist in their endeavors--often with surprising and valuable findings.

Sometimes, this persistence has unfortunate limits. These limits can be clearly seen when scientists reject results obtained through science when these results conflict with existing paradigms, "clinical wisdom," and emotionally-laden beliefs. One example of these limits has involved the extremely comprehensive Fort Bragg Child and Adolescent Mental Health Demonstration Project. The Project yielded data suggesting that the optimal clinical approaches for treating children with serious emotional disturbance were not optimal at all. Did this Project change clinical practice in any way or lead to a sincere questioning of approaches? To the contrary, its results were largely discounted, rationalized, and attacked--sometimes by the very mental health professionals who applauded its methodology before the results were publicized.

Another example--as reported in a previous Issue of IBPP--is the significant attack on a carefully carried out meta-evaluation of sex abuse research in the Psychological Bulletin that suggests that some children are not severely traumatized by the abuse. Most recently, as reported in the latest Issue of the American Psychological Association (APA) Monitor, the APA Chief Executive Officer (CEO) divulges that he has directed an unprecedented "independent expert evaluation" of the sex abuse study. He goes on to state that "sexual activity between children and adults should never be considered or labeled as harmless...". This may be the case from a legal and moral perspective, but mustn't a scientist ethically follow the data wherever it might lead? Perhaps, not. There may and should be some legal and moral constraints.

Hopefully, the CEO is merely trying to assert that APA strongly is against adult-child sex on legal and moral grounds. Perhaps, he is implying that science need not go in certain directions. But by implying or asserting that there are scientific grounds for asserting that adult-child sex is always harmful, science is being abused--unquestionably with significant harm.

As the child is parent to the adult, the Ft. Bragg and Psychological Bulletin controversies suggest that the child also is parent to scientific abuse. (See Hamner, K. M, Lambert, E. W, & Bickman, L. (1997). Children's mental health in a continuum of care: Clinical outcomes at 18 months for the Fort Bragg demonstration. *Journal of Mental Health Administration*, 24, 465-471; Martin, S. (July/August 1999). APA defends stance against the sexual abuse of children *American Psychological Association Monitor*, p. 47; Rind, B., Tromovitch, P., & Bauserman, R. (1998). A meta-analytic examination of assumed properties of child sexual abuse using college samples. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124, 22-53; The politics of science and the science of politics: Adult-child sex and child sexual abuse. (April 9, 1999). *IBPP*, 6(14).) (Keywords: Philosophy of Science, Science, Truth.)