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On Political Predictability and Control: A Contribution from Rehabilitation Psychology

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Title: On Political Predictability and Control: A Contribution from Rehabilitation Psychology

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Abstract. This article continues the series on research reported at the 1999 American Psychological Association (APA) Annual Convention, Boston, MA, August 24, 1999. The topic this week concerns perspectives on predictability and control from the field of rehabilitation psychology and implications of these perspectives for political psychology.

Predictability can denote the ability to foretell or forecast based on reason, feeling, imagination, and observation. Controllability can denote the ability to influence or effect an event. Although the two terms often are used interchangeably, their meanings only partially intersect. One can predict an event without having any influence or effect on that event. Also, one can influence or effect an event without foretelling or forecasting the event and without even being aware of the event and/or of foretelling or forecasting it.

The problem with these denotations is the assumption that such abilities exist. This assumption can be critiqued by analysts positing that such abilities are hypothetical constructs. In other words, people observe, imagine, reason, and feel about people--including themselves--as if such abilities existed and as if people possessed them. Of course, people may act as if they possessed many attributes--without those attributes or people's possession of them having ontological validity.

For people to attribute ontological validity to such attributes and to their sense of possessing them when such validity is problematic is frequently deemed a variant of social constructionism. Social constructionism denotes believing in some reality independent of one's reason, feeling, imagination, and observation when that reality is only dependent on these human activities.

According to a social constructionist analysis, people--even, social constructionists (if one closely watches their behavior when driving automobiles, seeking academic tenure, or choosing where to live and what to eat)--live their lives according to a reality that is ontologically problematic and tenuous. If this is the case, should predictability and control--as social constructs or as abilities standing independent of reason, feeling, imagination, and observation--continue to be vital and viable goals of individual and social life?

At the recent APA Convention, Hanoch Livneh of Portland State University posed this question for rehabilitation psychology and answered in the affirmative. In her theoretical paper, she writes that the "Application of both the "scientific" method's efforts to investigate and predict the more global human experiences to loss and disability and the constructivist approach to exploring the more unique and subjective meanings of a loss and disability can only result in the preparation of more skilled and well-rounded rehabilitation theoreticians, researchers, and practitioners" (p. 8).

An inevitable inference from this position is that creating and nurturing multiple ideologies bearing on predictability and control--ideologies that seem to reduce personal distress, improve quality of life and perceived well-being, increase (a sense of) independence, and provide meaningful vocational outlets--are appropriate regardless of the ontological validity of the referents of these ideologies and their

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putative consequences. But is this not the epitome of false consciousness? Is not the researcher implying that regardless of what is, one can believe what is--especially if what one believes as is provides comfort and feels good?

It seems as if one must be rehabilitated from what seems to rehabilitate. Is this also the case for political policymakers invoking notional successes and failures? Are their perceptions of predictability and control no more than that--i.e., perceptions? And in an iterative process, are these perceptual notions of predictability and control phenomenologically invalid regardless of their ontological invalidity? The existential dread and/or divine comedy that quickly surfaces might be beyond rehabilitation. (See Calvo, M.G., & Castillo, M.D. (1998). Predictive inferences take time to develop. *Psychological Research*, 61, 249-260; Griffin, D., & Buehler, R. (1999). Frequency, probability, and prediction: Easy solutions to cognitive illusions? *Cognitive Psychology*, 38, 48-78; Livneh, H. (August 1999). On predictability and control. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA; Presson, P.K., & Benassi, V.A. (1996). Illusion of control: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 11, 493-510; Shrauger, J.S., et al. (1996). Accuracy of self-predictions versus judgments by knowledgeable others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 1229-1243.) (Keywords: Control, Predictability.)