

4-27-2001

Is Science Ever Science? The Politics of Child Care

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2001) "Is Science Ever Science? The Politics of Child Care," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 15 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol10/iss15/2>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Is Science Ever Science? The Politics of Child Care

Author: Editor

Volume: 10

Issue: 15

Date: 2001-04-27

Keywords: Child Care, Corruption, Critical Psychology, Ideology

Abstract. This article explores the political behavior of psychologists in the carrying out of scientific tasks.

According to the American Psychological Association, the era of scientific psychology began in 1879 with the creation of the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt. The era allegedly is characterized (1) by a search for truth, (2) by a belief that there is an objective reality, (3) that this objective reality is material in nature, (4) that this objective reality is knowable to humans, (5) that there are appropriate methods to collect data--both methods and data being free of contamination by values, (6) that the collected data are the royal route to truth, (7) that statistical manipulation of psychological data is usually a necessity for accurate interpretation, and (8) that the assumptions on which statistical procedures are based do, indeed, hold for psychological data or--if they don't hold--do not significantly affect the degree to which the manipulations are necessary for accurate interpretation.

Yet many approaches to the philosophy of science and many contributors to the critical psychology movement have offered a different perspective of science wherein it is imbued with cultural values, has political implications for a society's winners and losers, and must function in a universe of ambiguity and uncertainty. As well, the objective, material, and empirical aspects of science function inadvertently or otherwise as a belief system that covers science's own cultural and political nature. People who believe in the cover--psychologists and psychological consumers--are aiding and abetting those who benefit from the political power relations that are aided and abetted by the objective, material, and empirical cover of psychology.

Another perspective on psychology as science is that it is no more than a power tool employed by its very purveyors to advance their own personal, political, and ideological goals. One manifestation is no more than blatant corruption as when data are falsified to support genetic inheritance of intelligence or the inferiority of various races and ethnic groups. Other manifestations involve a sort of righteous indignation wherein some belief is obviously correct, psychological data supporting it are obviously valid, while data that doesn't support it are suspect. Still other manifestations involve psychologists who might intellectually accept research not supporting their beliefs but still are impelled to combat the research because of its cultural or political implications.

A case in point is the last 15 years of controversy over the consequences of child care for child development. Resistance to a growing body of research suggesting that children who spend significant amounts of time in child care are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems concerning aggression and obedience than children who spend significant amounts of time by their mothers seems to tax all notions of scientific psychology. The objective, material, and empirical perspective continually brings up the need for controlling a seemingly endless list of variables before a conclusion is warranted. The critical psychology perspective highlights the political winners and losers stemming from whether child care is believed to be benign or malign, but it does this in a circular sequence of infinite iteration without the possibility of closure. And there appears to be the same infinite iteration concerning righteous indignation and combativeness of cultural and political warriors. Scientific resolution may not

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

involve science at all but be characterized more by the cycles of habituation and sensitization pertaining to any political issue.

Much as what's best for the child becomes a vehicle of political power in parental custody battles, what's best for the child vis a vis child care may have little to do with the child but much to do with the cares of adults. And should we not care about this? (See Bolterauer, L. (1975). On fanaticism. *Psyche: Zeitschrift fuer Psychoanalyse und ihre Anwendungen*, 29, 287-315; Davies, M.F. (1993). Dogmatism and the persistence of discredited beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 692-699; 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; Human rights and mental health: What happens when the right are wrong? (November 21, 1997). *IBPP*, 3(7); Sechrest, L., & Walsh, M. (1997). Dogma or data: Bragging rights. *American Psychologist*, 52, 436-450; Stolberg, S.G. (April 21, 2001). Another academic salvo from a "Mommy Wars" veteran. *The New York Times*, p. A7; Stolberg, S.G. (April 19, 2001). Link found between behavioral problems and time in child care. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Child Care, Corruption, Critical Psychology, Ideology.)