

6-16-2010

Psychologists Gone Wild: The Politics of Scientific Psychology

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2010) "Psychologists Gone Wild: The Politics of Scientific Psychology," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 16 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol16/iss16/1>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Psychologists Gone Wild: The Politics of Scientific Psychology

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Volume: 16

Issue: 16

Date: 2010-06-16

Keywords: Politics, Psychology, Science

Abstract: With power on the line in science, one should expect controversy beyond the substantive. In scientific psychology—whether discovering human nature or discovering what can be said about it—the search for the what of human nature becomes a mask for human nature.

If something is scientific, it's good. At least that's the premise of mass advertising with assertions that health products have been scientifically proven and online dating sites have been scientifically validated. At least that's the premise of political leaders, educators, and concerned citizens bemoaning shortfalls in science education. At least that's the premise of organizational leaders and econometrists who base their conclusions and decisions on the [scientific] data.

To many people, science connotes not only what's good, but what is right, true, and, at times, even what's beautiful. One might trace this connotation back at least as far as the Northern and Southern Renaissance; through the origins of modern science described in Herbert Butterfield's eponymous work (1957), to the beginnings of the Modernist period at the turn of the 20th century. But with the modernist period came a realization among many of the European intellectual elite and their American followers that with science and technology would come horror and atrocity not good, right, or beautiful, even if true.

In any case, believers in the goodness of science remained and remain, many believing science to be devoid of bias, values, and anything extraneous to the pure search for what is. And—as with the logical positivists—if the what of what is were to include bias and values, i.e., bias and values would not be applied to the what but would constitute part of the what, then this would be deemed either nothing or nonsense. However, science—as with any other human pursuit—has always come replete with...the human. So, the search for what is assumes that there is the what for which to search and, if so, that searching will get us there if the right mode of search is used.

Moreover, from the earliest human speculation, one's position on whether there's a what and how to search and—if there's a what and preferred search strategy—what answers seem to turn up have had very concrete consequences beyond the stated scientific quest of knowing the what. These consequences have applied to the searchers, the knowers, the believers and disbelievers, the agnostics, and those who seem to be any or all of the above. These consequences have included life or death, praise or ridicule, wealth or poverty, progress or regress, complaisance or anxiety, and self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness. Even if science were as above suspicion as Caesar's wife and pure as the driven snow, the coin of the realm would still be power defined as having the ability and motivation to approach a desired disparity between the real and the ideal in a world of finite resources and infinite need. And, thus, through the scientific quest some have become God' representative on Earth or the king's advisor, others tortured or burned at the stake.

With power on the line in science, one should expect controversy beyond the substantive. In scientific psychology—whether discovering human nature or discovering what can be said about it—the search for the what of human nature becomes a mask for human nature. Three examples follow.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

The first comes from Bickman, L. (1996). A continuum of care: More is not always better. *American Psychologist*, 51, 689-701. Bickman and his associates carried out a study on the effectiveness of mental health and substance abuse services for children and adolescents. They increased access to care, continuity of care, and client satisfaction for their clinical subjects, as they also decreased the degree of restriction in the treatment environment. All these factors have been and are considered positive contributors to successful treatment outcome. However, the results of the study showed an increase in cost with no better outcome results than control subjects! Because of the a priori efforts to ensure the highest quality of scientific research, it was as if motherhood and apple pie were found to be undesirable, unworthy, and frauds. Much a posteriori explanation from other psychologists was dedicated to explain (or explain away) the results—defending mom and the pie, so to speak. In this case, the defense was not necessary, because the clinical practices founded on what Bickman and his associates successfully critiqued are still privileged today as found in clinical texts, administrative strategic plans, and so on. It's as if the study of Bickman and his associates never happened!

The second example comes from 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. Rind and his associates carried out a study on the validity of the belief that “child sexual abuse (CSA) causes intense harm, regardless of gender, pervasively in the general population.” The researchers found that students with CSA were, on average, slightly less well adjusted than a control group. They also found that family environment seemed to be a stronger explanatory factor for adjustment than CSA, that maladjustment was neither pervasive nor intense on average for students with CSA, that males reacted less negatively to CSA than females, and that some students reported a positive reaction to CSA. A public uproar followed including verbal attacks on the researchers and the American Psychological Association by federal legislators and members of the general republic. As well, anecdotal data suggest death threats were communicated to the researchers. All this, even as their data seemed to conform to other national samples. Those who attacked the researchers most often conflated the is with the ought as first popularized in Western intellectual thought by David Hume. What seemed to be the case—that some people were not injured that badly by CSA or even viewed it positively—was taken as advocacy for CSA—that CSA should be legal, moral, and ethical.

The third example is more recent and comes from Skeem, J. L., & Cooke, D. J. (2010). Is criminal behavior a central component of psychopathy? Conceptual directions for resolving the debate. *Psychological Assessment*, 22, 433-445. Skeem and Cooke critiqued the most significant psychometric instrument in the history of scientific psychological research on psychopathy—the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R). Among other observations, they posited that the PCL-R confounded criminal behavior as a central component as opposed to a correlate of psychopathy. They also commented that the PCL-R as a measurement instrument had been taken by at least some other researchers as the totality of the theoretical construct of psychopathy itself. Finally, they maintained that some researchers had misconstrued the PCL-R so that psychopathy was viewed only as a violent variant of anti-social personality disorder. According to *The New York Times* (June 12, 2010) and *Science* (June 11, 2010), the work of Skeem and Cooke was finally published—but only after 3 years including a threatened lawsuit, reviews, revisions, legal correspondence, and as of this writing an agreement by concerned parties that publication would be accompanied by a rebuttal including the PCL-R creator and a comment on the rebuttal by Skeem & Cooke. That such social dissension involves a social construct—psychopathy—that can relate to social dissension seems imbued with verbal, dramatic, and situational irony that might only be fully savored by the classical Greek Gods.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Alexander Pope (1730) wrote that “Nature and nature’s laws lay hid in night/God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was light”. Psychology as science, and science, may be bringing far more heat than light. (Comments may be sent to bloomr@erau.edu) (Keywords: Politics, Psychology, Science.)