

Editorial

PSYCHOLOGY AS SCIENCE AND HELPING PROFESSION

What is Psychology?

According to a once popular older dictionary (Drever 1952: 233) psychology is “a branch of science.” More current web based definitions are similar, as for example, “The science that deals with mental processes and behavior” (<http://www.answers.com/topic/psychology>, accessed 27 May 2009). Psychologists, and social scientists, as well as the general public, regard psychology as a science, which means that the theories, practices, and approaches of psychology must have the characteristics of science.

In addition to the scientific aspects, psychology is used to “help” people, through tests and measurements, diagnosis as to personality types and intelligence, psychotherapy, and as well, psychology serves as a basis for education, an adjunct of medicine, and a guide for spiritual and religious approaches to human behaviour.

Further, psychologists, based on their scientific interests and their helping motives, believe that their work extends to people of “lower social classes,” people with differences, and people of other cultures. That is, psychology is believed to be universal.

What is Psychology, Part II

Science and scientific method has been built over a long history. Psychology, unlike physics, mathematics, biology, and related fields of study, depends on “constructs” or assemblages of observations and data. An example might be the constructs of anxiety or depression or intelligence or schizophrenia. Anxiety, however, for one situation or person, may not always be the same for another situation or person, for a varied and changing collection of symptoms and behaviours exist that might be tied together to fit the construct. Throughout the psychological literature, constructs are claimed to be scientific, when in fact, they are assemblages that do not meet the strict and exacting requirements of science.

Much of Western psychology is focused on individuals and individual behaviour. Further, much of the research that forms the base for theories and practice was conducted on university

sophomores, and then “generalized” to larger groups. This approach may fit in with free market ideologies, but individual and collective behaviour and the behaviour of those who are not university sophomores may well not be the norm and/or rule in other cultures. Thus, psychology as conceived and taught in Western universities is culturally and socially limited.

In terms of the helping motive, the use of psychology has strayed far from being a benign or helping profession. For example, psychologists James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen operated a company, Mitchell, Jessen & Associates which took the psychological theory of learned helplessness to new levels. They adapted the Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) training from prior times, used previously to train American military personnel to resist interrogations. They created a program for the prisoners held by the US government to torture al-Qaeda prisoners. Waterboarding and stress positions and sleep deprivation were only a few of the many techniques used, based on psychological interventions.

Recently this firm was fired by the new CIA Director, Leon Panetta (CIA Fired Interrogation Contractors Linked to Waterboarding <http://www.truthout.org/061509D> viewed 16 June 2009). That does not negate the use of psychology in the design, conduct, and execution of torture tactics by highly trained psychologists, and even the American Psychology Association was not inclined to vociferously oppose such behaviour (Eidelson, “No Place to Hide: Torture, Psychologists, and the APA” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o84RE-9023U> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o84RE-9023U>>, <http://royeidelson.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/>, <http://psysr.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/> <<http://psysr.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/>>).

Psychology has been widely used to advance advertising, media presentations, and condition people to accept the consumer society, corporate culture, and materialism. Few psychologists have objected to this use of their “so-called science” to promote the interests of those who profit from such behaviour.

As to the use of psychology for people of different social, economic and cultural backgrounds, numerous studies have indicated that this is in

fact, simply not the case. A social, class, economic, and similar biases has been standard for a long time, and this has never been suitably addressed (Sternberg et al. 2007).

Conclusion

Psychology as a theoretical and practical field of study then, has some major issues that need to be addressed. Integrity, scientific integrity, actions by practitioners, ethical standards, and the scientific and methodological base all need to be examined, analysed, and redesigned. Perhaps the advent of a new journal based outside the past centres of psychological research and practice, can bring some non-western and innovative insights into these complex issues and find some useful directions for the future. The need is enormous.

REFERENCES

- Answers.com 2009. <http://www.answers.com/topic/psychology>, 16 June 2009.
- Drever James 1952. *A Dictionary of Psychology*. Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc.
- Eidelson, Roy 2009. "No Place to Hide: Torture, Psychologists, and the APA" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o84RE-9023U> <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o84RE-9023U>>, <http://royeidelson.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/> <<http://royeidelson.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/>>, <http://psysr.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/> <<http://psysr.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/no-place-to-hide/>> (accessed 22 June 2009).
- Pincus Walter 2009. CIA Fired Firms Aiding Questioning: One Helped to Introduce Waterboarding, *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2009.
- Sternberg Robert J, Roediger Henry L, Halpern Diane F (Eds.) 2007. *Critical Thinking in Psychology*. Cambridge: University Press.

Robert J. Gregory