



Practicing psychology without an empirical evidence-base: The bricoleur model



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ABSTRACT

The scientist-practitioner-model is rejected, based on an earlier critique of the current paradigm for psychological research. Ten cases exemplifying a bricoleur type of practice without a discernible empirical evidence-base are briefly presented. In the absence of useful empirical scientific evidence, the bricoleur model is proposed as a possible rationale for professional psychological practice.

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The background of this paper is a rejection of the Boulder model of the scientist-practitioner (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2009) based on an extensive earlier critique of the current paradigm of psychological research (Smedslund, 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2015, 2016). The scientist-practitioner model has great appeal (APA, 2006), and has engendered much discussion (Norcross, Beutler, & Levant, 2006) but if, as is argued here, little useful empirical scientific support for practice is available, the rationale for practice must be redefined. This article is an attempt to formulate a consistent position for acting as a professional psychologist *without* a base in empirical research. Ten cases from my own practice serve as examples of the scope of practice of a *bricoleur*. The term is borrowed from Levi-Strauss (1966) and denotes a jack-of-all-trades, relying on what is at hand and, if necessary, on unconventional means, to solve problems that resist conventional solutions. It is possible that, in reality, most psychological practitioners work in this way, even while programmatically expressing allegiance to the scientist-practitioner model.

To begin, I summarize and further develop my critique of the currently dominant empirical research paradigm, as presented in the publications referred to above. According to my critique, the assumptions, methods and results of this paradigm are generally unsuitable for supporting practice and must be replaced by a different kind of foundational premises. After that, I present ten

cases from my own practice as illustrations of the work of a bricoleur, and argue that they were not, and could not have been, derived from empirical research. Finally, I elaborate my critique, and present and discuss the bricoleur model.

1. Critique of the dominant research paradigm

The critique ultimately rests on a consideration of the implications of four very general characteristics of psychological phenomena. It appears that due to these four characteristics, empirical research becomes severely curtailed and cannot support the work of the practitioner. In what follows reference is primarily to practice with individuals.

1.1. Infinitely numerous determinants

Psychological processes are influenced by *infinitely* numerous factors. Although it is true that predictions in all empirical sciences have an “error” component, psychology differs from the physical sciences in two ways.

Firstly, processes studied by physical science involve only the here-and-now, whereas processes studied in psychology are influenced also by the expected future, the remembered past, the logically inferred, the hypothetical, and the imaginary. This means that psychological processes can be influenced by literally anything, whereas physical science is restricted to the momentary and local. This difference is important. It can be illustrated by the simple

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example of raising an arm and extending a finger upwards. This movement can be described physically and as involving neural processes at different levels. The number of different possible physical descriptions can be taken to be finite and, in any case, is smaller than the number of possible psychological meanings of the movement which is literally infinite, because it varies with the context involved and the number of possible contexts is infinite. The preceding means that the number of possible psychological interpretations of a given observation always is higher than the number of possible physical interpretations of the same observation. A direct consequence of the infinite number of possible psychological interpretations is that theorizing becomes difficult, since a theory can only have a limited number of variables in order to be manageable.

Another difference compounds the effect of the first one. This has to do with the prospects of abstraction in the two domains. Abstraction means focusing on one or a few dimensions or factors, and disregarding the remaining variation. In physical sciences a few major factors included in a theory often account for most of the variation. When this is the case one can safely rely on the theory and disregard the small deviations as “error.” By contrast, more than a century of empirical research in psychology has shown that even major psychological factors rarely account for more than a small part of the total observed variation. One reason for this is that due to the incessant irreversible learning, psychological processes are determined not only by the here-and-now context, but also by the effects of countless earlier, expected or imagined experiences. This means that because theories can only include a small number of factors in order to be manageable, and because these factors, even jointly, tend to account for only a small part of the variance, psychological theories cannot be very useful in practice. In everyday life, a theory is regarded as practically useful only to the extent that it allows one to make mostly correct predictions. Therefore, a theory that explains only a small part of the observed total variation is regarded as not very practically useful. In daily life, one cannot accept that laws, contracts, agreements, and appointments are only kept at levels marginally better than chance, and the same is true for the outcome of interventions in psychological practice. The infinitely manifold variability of individuals and situations prevents practically useful theorizing. What is needed is extensive knowledge of each individual in a specific life situation and with a specific history, in order to be of help. It may be concluded that since empirically based psychological theories rarely account for more than a small part of the variance, they cannot provide a sufficient base for practice.

Abstraction or categorization means selecting and focusing on one or a few factors (aspects, traits, dimensions) and disregarding the remainder of the variation. This works in many areas of natural science because of one circumstance that is not present in psychology, namely that a substantial part of the observed variation is accounted for. If a theory containing a few variables accounts for nearly all the variation (as in some natural sciences), then the abstraction (selection of these variables) works, and the remaining observed variation may be discarded under the heading of “error.” In psychology there are no general theories that even approach this criterion. For example, the difference between the various theoretically based treatments in psychotherapy only account for a small percentage of the observed variance in outcome (Wampold, 2001) and, therefore, these theoretical differences cannot be regarded as very helpful in guiding individual treatment. This interpretation is confirmed by Wampold in a personal communication quoted in (Ronnestad, 2008, p. 449).

My conclusion is that the infinite number of determinants in itself prevents the formulation of practically useful empirical theories in psychology.

1.2. Irreversibility

Psychological processes are strictly *irreversible*, meaning that one can never return to a starting point. Experiences are remembered. Empirical research is based on *inductive reasoning*, meaning that observations made under given conditions are expected to be *repeated* under the same conditions. However, if processes are irreversible, the same conditions will never return, and results can *never* be strictly repeated. Hence, psychology as the study of individuals is basically inhospitable to empirical research because such research makes sense only to the extent that the findings are taken to be replicable.

Despite the irreversibility of individual processes, the empirical attitude is still generally upheld for two reasons: First, deviation of group data from chance (statistical “significance”) has become the generally accepted criterion of success in contrast to the common sense criterion of approximation to perfection. The very modest criterion of statistical significance is frequently reached, and is counted as important in academia, even though it is not so in actual practice.

A second reason encouraging empirical research is the frequency of apparently stable traits and tendencies. Like whorls in a stream that remain unchanged as long as the position of stones on the bottom and the total water supply are constant, tendencies and traits are stable as long as the outcomes remain the same. Repetition is remembered. The ensuing apparent stability makes it difficult to recognize the essentially *historical* (conditional) character of traits and trends and makes it easier to maintain the illusion of accumulating knowledge. Observed psychological invariance is generally dependent on temporarily stable consequences. The net outcome is overconfidence in the validity of research results, and a tendency to disregard the scarcity of successful replications (Open Science Collaboration, 2015).

Irreversibility prevents genuinely accumulative empirical research. One cannot know more and more about what is constantly and irreversibly changing.

1.3. Uniqueness

Psychological processes are *unique*, and this means that persons can only be understood by taking this uniqueness into account. The uniqueness is there because persons are genetically different, and because they incessantly and irreversibly learn different things from their experience, which always contains infinitely variable and frequently fortuitous events.

An important quality of uniqueness is that one cannot talk about it exhaustively. Even the most elementary words, expressing semantic primitives (Wierzbicka, 1996) are abstractions, and even highly skillful and nuanced verbal descriptions cannot completely cover what different people actually do and respond to. The ultimate failure of vocabulary is expressed in familiar remarks of the type: “Well, you know, Peter is Peter!”

Uniqueness is a feature that contributes to making the requirement of evidence-based practice unreal. Uniqueness cannot be apprehended by relying on words and, therefore, cannot be subjected to systematic research or theorizing. Even so, uniqueness must be taken into account in all practical work because interventions based on abstractions are, by definition, at risk of ignoring potentially important nuances. This is especially important in psychology where, as has been mentioned, even major theoretical variables account for only a small part of the variance. This makes it important to encourage initial “openness” and discourage “pre-conceptions” while getting to know clients. Uniqueness cannot be grasped by relying exclusively on categorization and theorizing. The result is a dilemma. We must talk and yet

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