



Understanding ‘relevance’ in psychology



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

History of psychology
Market relevance
Mode 2
Social change
Social relevance

Since the 1970s, psychologists around the world have questioned the ‘social relevance’ of psychology in their societies. Curiously, the matter of ‘social relevance’ is under-theorized in the discipline, a state of affairs this paper attempts to correct. First, it describes how disagreements about psychology’s cognitive interest – and subject matter – create an environment in which accusations of ‘social irrelevance’ can flourish. Second, it asserts that applied psychology’s reliance on basic psychology for its scientific authority makes debates about ‘social relevance’ inevitable. And third, it claims that the discipline’s longstanding antithesis to the social domain leaves it vulnerable to these debates – particularly in recent decades that have witnessed rapid social change. The paper reflects further on the rise of ‘market relevance’ in the global academy and its significance for psychology today.
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1. Introduction

For several decades, psychologists the world over have questioned the ‘social relevance’ of the discipline, accusing it of failing to deliver on what the second president of the American Psychological Association, George Trumbull Ladd, had imagined – “that it is able and destined to contribute greatly to the welfare of mankind” (1894, p. 19). Amid the turbulence of the 1960s, American social psychologists set about advancing arguments concerning the historicity (Gergen, 1973) and triviality (Ring, 1967) of the field. As for their European counterparts, behaviorist reductionism (Harré & Secord, 1972) and a slavish methodolatry (Moscovici, 1972) were identified as the root causes of the disciplinary malaise. Meanwhile, in China, psychology had been banned for some years by decree of the Cultural Revolution – for espousing bourgeois gobble-dygook (Petzold, 1987). For Indian social psychologists, the state of crisis involved a choice between “straight-jacketed methodology” and “real-life issues” (J. B. P. Sinha, 1997, p. 79), while, in Latin America, the construction of *psicología de la liberación* was under way because “psychology as a

whole ... has stayed on the sidelines of the great movements and away from the distresses of the peoples of Latin America” (Martín-Baró, 1996, p. 17). In the Islamic world, a consensus had emerged that Muslim psychologists – in their eagerness to locate themselves beneath the aegis of science – had parroted Western psychological theories and practices that were inapplicable in their countries (Badri, 1979). And as far as Africa was concerned, the continent’s singular lack of involvement in the life of the discipline was such that, by the early 1990s, it was reckoned that “the average black African is likely to declare that he has never heard of the term ‘Psychology’ in his life, or if he has heard of it, he is most likely to swear that he does not understand what it means” (Eze, 1991, p. 28).

In fact, when one considers the axe-grinding of the 1920s that pitted Edwin Boring against Lewis Terman (O’Donnell, 1979), modern psychology’s travails with the peddlers of ‘relevance’ reach back nearly a hundred years. In the wake of the Great War, many psychologists adopted the view that the appropriate development of the discipline was best served by an orientation towards the alleviation of social problems (Rosnow, 1981): “[m]obilization had invigorated the social ideals of service and efficiency and had stimulated the postwar demand for what was precipitately called psychotechnology” (O’Donnell, 1979, p.

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290). The Great Depression, too, served to deepen the sensitivity of scientists to social issues, a process that accelerated with the outbreak of the Second World War (Burr, 2003). The 1936 founding of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) was in part a reaction against the perceived ‘irrelevance’ of a psychological science that had failed to meet its human welfare mandate. Notwithstanding the dangers of origin-diving, it may be claimed with some justification that the history of ‘relevance’ corresponds to no less than a history of the discipline.

Curiously, psychologists have never theorized this matter of ‘relevance’. Then again, its bewildering indexicality (Hessels, van Lente, & Smits, 2009) makes it difficult to assess the merits of a term that vacillates between over-inclusive catchall and empty signifier. Nonetheless, this paper will attempt to address the oversight. It takes the position that, despite the *word* not always being used by interlocutors, ‘relevance’ as a *concept* is invoked whenever an estimation is made regarding “the expected value [disciplinary activities] will have for society” (Hessels, van Lente, & Smits, 2009, p. 388). Accordingly, the paper offers several explanations for the resilience of ‘relevance’ discourse in psychology. It reflects on the discipline’s uncertainty regarding its cognitive interest, its dependence on a ‘pure’ science for intellectual respectability, and its adjustment difficulties in contexts of social upheaval – the totality of which makes psychology susceptible to charges of ‘irrelevance’. The paper explores, also, the changing meaning of ‘relevance’ in higher education and the implications for ‘relevance’ in the discipline today.

2. Psychology and its subject matter

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Jürgen Habermas (1972) describes three modes of scientific enquiry, each of which produces ‘interested’ knowledge. First, in the *empirical-analytic* (i.e. natural) sciences, hypotheses are tested via observation and measurement in order to generate nomological facts. Considered value-free, this type of predictive knowledge aids technical mastery of the environment. Second, in the *historical-hermeneutic* (i.e. social) sciences, the assumption is that human action – enabled by consciousness – is inherently meaningful to self and others. “Access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation” (Habermas 1972, p. 309), which occurs through acts of interpretation. The investigator’s situatedness is acknowledged in that “[t]he world of traditional meaning discloses itself to the interpreter only to the extent that his own world becomes clarified at the same time” (Habermas 1972, pp. 309–310). Knowledge obtained hermeneutically has a practical – rather than technical – cognitive interest in a “possible consensus among actors in the framework of a self-understanding derived from tradition” (Habermas 1972, p. 310). And third, in the sciences of *social action*, law-obeying knowledge is also sought, although an attempt is made to produce a reflective consciousness in “those whom the laws are about” (Habermas 1972). Here, the cognitive interest is emancipatory and seeks liberation from “ideologically frozen relations of dependence” (Habermas 1972).

Psychology has the unusual distinction of belonging to all three knowledge traditions. The discipline’s persisting failure to demarcate its boundaries – its most enduring controversy has to do with the scope of its subject matter – has encouraged the proliferation of an astonishing array of fields and sub-fields. On the other hand, it has also bequeathed a legacy of turf wars exemplified by incessant calls for ‘relevance’. For, despite ‘the individual’ being identified as the discipline’s proper focus of attention, its meaning has been overextended to the point of promoting either a dilettantism of sorts or the fullest culmination of human disciplining yet. Sensation, perception, will, habits, consciousness, mind, brain, the unconscious, behavior, cognition, being, personality, attitudes, sociality, subjectivity, discourse and community have all been advanced as the discipline’s proper starting point, with the lack of consensus fueling one ‘revolution’ after another: a behaviorist revolution ended introspectionism, a cognitive revolution ended the ‘social irrelevance’ of ‘rat psychology’ and a discursive revolution (Harré, 2001) was touted as the answer to cognitivist reductionism at the same time that a dialogical revolution was expected to remedy the shortcomings of this second cognitive revolution (Shotter, 2001). But underpinning these disagreements about questions and methods is a basic dispute about the discipline’s legitimate cognitive interest. Committed variously to the interests of control, understanding and critique, psychology has never managed to resolve this fundamental debate – which Kuhn (1962) viewed as evidence of its ‘pre-paradigmatic’ status.

And yet, even if psychologists were to agree on a single subject matter and on how best to study it, appeals for ‘social relevance’ would still not subside. As historical constructions, psychological categories are not naturally occurring phenomena – they only appear that way because “the network of categories ... has been adopted from the broader language community to which psychologists belong” (Danziger, 2010, p. 55). Standard historiography in the discipline merely formalizes this appearance by virtue of a tacit commitment to “a timeless human nature” (Danziger, 2010, p. 56), sanctioning thereby the use of natural scientific methods for its investigation. Psychological categories are ‘human kinds’, which, because they permeate social life, are value-laden and able to operate upon their human carriers, altering continually the ‘things’ to which they refer (Hacking, 1995). A constantly evolving subject matter would only lead to further disagreements about questions and methods – and a return to debates about ‘relevance’.

3. Basic and applied psychology

Apart from this reflexive quality of human subjectivity, psychology is also structured in a manner that invites questions about ‘relevance’. To be precise, there are two requirements that must be met in order to establish a discipline, namely, the formation of cooperative partnerships and the production of socially useful knowledge (Danziger, 1990). In order to build effective alliances, new knowledge producers must prove their credentials to established producers. Knowledge must be created in

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