

Introduction

Academic clinical psychology in the 21st Century: Challenging the sacred cows

Those of us who are faculty members in research-oriented clinical psychology programs have come to take certain assumptions about our academic lives for granted. Many of us can practically recite them by heart: pure theoretical work without an accompanying research program is a luxury that most psychology departments cannot afford; research productivity, often assessed by the number of empirical papers per year, is a valid metric of faculty quality; and large, federally funded grants are either a necessity or at least a desideratum for academic success. Indeed, these assumptions are so much a part of the “ground” (to borrow a concept from Gestalt psychology) of everyday academic life in clinical psychology – and domains of study related to clinical psychology, such as social, personality, and counseling psychology – that we rarely bother to think about, let alone question, them. Nor do we typically consider their implications for either the production of knowledge in clinical psychology and allied disciplines or the education of graduate students.

My goal for this special issue of *Applied & Preventive Psychology* is to subject these and other “sacred cows” of academic clinical psychology to thoughtful scrutiny. My intention is not necessarily to debunk these sacred cows, but to evaluate them with a fresh eye in the hopes of transforming them from “ground” into “figure.” In doing so, I have adopted the position of philosophers of science who contend that knowledge advances most efficiently by subjecting our cherished claims to informed criticism (e.g., Bartley, 1962). By making readers more cognizant of these sacred cows and their implications for research and education, I hope to initiate a field-wide discussion of how to structure clinical psychology graduate programs to best enhance scientific progress.

Even here, of course, prominent scholars disagree sharply about the state of scientific progress in clinical psychology and cognate disciplines, with some bemoaning its painfully slow pace (Lykken, 1991; Meehl, 1978; Strupp, 1976) and others maintaining that such gloominess is unwarranted (Ilardi & Feldman, 2001; Rosenthal, 1995). Nevertheless, few would quarrel with the suggestion that the reinforcement contingencies of academic clinical psychology programs are not always arranged to maximize scientific progress.

My approach in this special issue is unorthodox. Rather than begin with a review of the state of academic clinical psychology in 2007, I have elected to revisit a classic article that is over a quarter of a century old, namely Paul Wachtel’s (1980) *American Psychologist* essay, “Investigation and its discontents: Some constraints on progress in psychological research” (I am grateful to the American Psychological Association for granting us permission to reproduce Wachtel’s article in its entirety). In re-reading Wachtel’s article last year, I was struck by its prescience and timeliness. Indeed, one could justifiably argue – along with many commentators in this special issue of *Applied and Preventive Psychology* – that the issues Wachtel raised regarding our field’s emphases on (a) investigation at the potential expense of conceptualization, (b) quantitative productivity, and (c) grant funding are even more pertinent in 2007 than they were in 1980. It occurred to me that organizing a Special Issue around Wachtel’s article would be thought-provoking and stimulating for readers, and *Applied & Preventive Psychology* editor David Smith agreed. I am grateful to Dave for his assistance and support in bringing this unconventional project to fruition.

I have been remarkably fortunate to recruit a “lucky 13” distinguished scholars (in some cases with co-authors) from both inside and outside of clinical psychology to author commentaries on Wachtel’s (1980) article, and equally fortunate to solicit Paul Wachtel’s cooperation in authoring an integrative response to these commentaries. These commentaries not only offer thoughtful responses to Wachtel’s article, but raise a variety of worthy issues in their own right. I suspect that readers will be as struck as I was by the high quality of both the commentaries and of Wachtel’s summary response. Moreover, I hope that readers will find the interchange to be as provocative as I did, and to generate as many fruitful questions as answers concerning the state of academic clinical psychology in the early 21st Century. Simply put, you are all in for a treat.

Acknowledgement

I thank David Smith for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

References

- Bartley, W. W. (1962). *The retreat to commitment*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Ilardi, S. S., & Feldman, D. (2001). Cognitive neuroscience and the progress of psychological science: Once more with feeling (and other mental constructs). *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 57*, 1113–1117.
- Lykken, D. T. (1991). What's wrong with psychology anyway? In D. Cicchetti & W. Grove (Eds.), *Matters of Public Interest, Vol. 1 Thinking clearly about psychology: Essays in honor of Paul Everett Meehl* (pp. 2–39). University of Minnesota Press.
- Meehl, P. E. (1978). Theoretical risks and tabular asterisks: Sir Karl, Sir Ronald, and the slow progress of soft psychology. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 4*, 806–834.
- Rosenthal, R. (1995). Progress in clinical psychology: Is there any? *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 2*, 133–150.
- Strupp, H. (1976). Clinical psychology, irrationalism, and the erosion of excellence. *American Psychologist, 31*, 561–581.
- Wachtel, P. L. (1980). Investigation and its discontents: Some constraints on progress in psychological research. *American Psychologist, 35*, 399–408.

Scott O. Lilienfeld

Department of Psychology, Room 206, Emory University,
532 Kilgo Circle, Atlanta, GA 30322, United States

E-mail address: slilien@emory.edu