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Beyond non-replicability

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At the recent AGM of the Scottish Branch of the Society, Nicola Gale, while discussing the currently proposed reorganisations of the Society at some length, briefly mentioned the need to do more to promote psychology, the “replication crisis”, and the All Party Parliamentary Group on psychology.

To its shame, the BPS has not, in the past, paid much attention to these issues. Thus it has done little to counteract what Rothschild, in his 1982 report on the Social Science Research Council, identified as a tendency of social scientists to focus on minor issues and fail to study the wider processes of which those issues formed a symptom. (Today I have in mind such things as the tendency to focus on “fixing” “dyslexia” instead of the operation of the “educational” system which produces or exacerbates those problems). Worse, it has done little to challenge the institutional, funding, and contractual arrangements for the conduct and publication of research, originally introduced by the Thatcher government, which contribute so much to this process. Yet, as I show in *Criminal (though not yet criminalised) misapplications of science, logic, and authority*

(<http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/Criminal-misapplications-of-science.pdf> also tinyurl.com/ydaafxzy), these arrangements are not only largely responsible for the non-replicability crisis (although one would not guess it from looking at most of the proposals for ways of fixing that crisis) they are largely responsible for such things as a swathe of entirely misleading evaluations of “educational effectiveness”. These have, in turn, reinforced what can only be described as the brutal imposition of Social Darwinism on schools and society via the mythology of a bastardised version of liberalism. In this context, the “replication crisis” pales into insignificance.

In response to my intervention along these lines, Nicola mentioned the APPG on psychology. However, a glance at current activities of that group strongly suggests that they are falling into exactly the same trap: proffering solutions to problems as framed by politicians instead of seeking to influence the way the systems which result in those problems operate.

It seems to me that the very least we can do at this time is to broaden the non-replicability debate to encompass discussion of the production and deployment of vast quantities of “policy-relevant” research (replicable or not) that is often so misleading that it leads to the implementation of policies which inflict serious damage on many people and society.

This should not only lead to discussion of the nature of “science” and the ways in which understanding is to be advanced but also to discussion of how the current arrangements for the conduct and dissemination of research need to change.

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