

**Poisonous Paradigms:  
Unethical Procedures and Injunctions at the Heart of Psychology.**

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This symposium will explore the possibility that injunctions to seriously unethical behaviour are built into some of the most fundamental assumptions, recommendations, and paradigms of psychology.

Psychology is not alone in this respect. As Shiva has argued, it is also true of such things as religious injunctions to have dominion over non-believers, animals, and plants on the one hand and reductionist science, with its links to monocultures – whether of mind, in food production, or in human culture on the other.

All of these processes have the effect of negating *homo sapiens*' instinctive predisposition to act in the long term interests of the species, that is to say, of negating the genetically functional tendency to act *ethically*. Note that the predisposition to act in the long term interest of the species implies acting to conserve habitat – the planet.

One illustration of the way in which codes of conduct which ostensibly set out to protect the public from incompetent psychologists have the opposite effect is to be found in the apparently reasonable demand of the US Joint committee on Standards for the Evaluation of Educational Policies and Programs that only reliable and valid tests should be used.

Yet the *first* requirement of any evaluation of an individual or of an educational programme must be that it should be objective. That is to say, it should, in the case of the individual, reveal his or her most important strengths and (depending on the uses to which it is to be put) perhaps his or her weaknesses. In the case of an evaluation of an educational or developmental programme it should reveal *all* its important personal and social, short and long term, consequences, for all the main different types of people involved. Note that this implies documenting both positive and negative outcomes. What is good for one

individual may be bad for another. What is good for the individual in the short term may be bad in the long term. What is good for the individual may be bad for society.

In short, the first requirement for objectivity is *comprehensiveness*.

The failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of this requirement is, of course, at the heart of Shiva's critique of reductionist science: An evaluation of agricultural process – whether it be the utilisation of cattle feed or pesticide or fertiliser or antibiotic – which looks only at the effect on short term yields cannot be regarded as objective, competent, or scientific, never mind ethical.

But, to return to education, as things stand, we have no good measures of such things as self-confidence, creativity, or the predisposition to get together with others to contribute in one way or another to a group or community which will act in the long term interests of the species and the planet. [Actually, we are also unable meaningfully to measure what people *know*, but let that pass for the moment.]

The result is that the Joint Committee's recommendation effectively *ensures* that all evaluations of people and programmes lack comprehensiveness and are, ipso-facto, incompetent.

Evaluations carried out without such measures tend to deny people who possess talents like those just mentioned (while perhaps lacking "academic" ability) opportunity to develop and use talents which are crucial to organisations and society. This not only harms the individuals, it tends to deprive society of the opportunity to develop and utilise such talents in the future.

More seriously, it results in the denigration of, and closure of, the very educational and developmental programmes that nurture the qualities most crucial to fundamental reform of, and thus the survival of, our society.

But we, as psychologists, have here not only contributed to the perpetuation of fraudulent and unethical activity at an individual level, we have almost completely failed to discuss the emergent properties – the competencies – of groups which can tap and utilise the huge range of divergent talents that are available.

Thus, finding a way in which those who conduct educational evaluations can at least index crucially important outcomes is perhaps the least of the scientific and ethical problems we face: Still more important is the task of indexing the effect on *diversity* and the emergent properties of groups or cultures.

The problem, then, exactly parallels that which Shiva has highlighted in agriculture. And the way forward is to be found, not through the attempt to prescribe standards for the work of the individual scientist, but through the reform of the practice and funding of science.

But the absence of appropriate measures stems from some more fundamental assumptions.

One set of these has to do with the way we think about and try to measure such qualities as the ability to reason, take initiative, and read.

All of these are difficult and demanding activities which people will neither develop nor display unless they are engaged in tasks they care about. Furthermore, “the same” activity looks very different in different contexts – just as copper looks very different when combined only with oxygen and when combined with sulphur as well. Can one doubt that panel beaters “think” about what they are doing? But that thinking would not show up on conventional intelligence tests. So extending our framework to 7 or 9 “types” of intelligence does not address the problem. People “think”, usually non-verbally, about all sorts of different things. All are creative in relation to things they care about – whether that be about creating disruption, a beautiful vase, a new scientific theory, a harmonious personal relationship, or anything else.

It follows that these qualities – which psychologists have sought ways of measuring for more than a century – cannot be measured in the way the currently dominant paradigm enjoins us to try to do it.

When it comes to the concept of validation, one encounters similar problems. People are not usually doing what other people think they are doing: One manager is preoccupied with advancing himself in his career by running a ‘lean, mean’ organisation and getting rid of all the staff who would create a future, another about creating network-based working relationships which lead to the evolution of new products, another about manipulating the company’s image on the stock market and so on. Hogan has documented that some 50% of American managers are so preoccupied with personal advancement at the expense of their organisations that they drive those organisations into the ground.

Thus, to validate a test that claims to measure “the ability to think”, for example, does in fact measure that quality, one cannot use criteria like productivity (which is, in any case, a *group* rather than individual characteristic). One has, somehow, to get inside people’s heads and find what they ‘think’ *about* before one can make any statement about how well they can think.

These observations clearly call the most widespread teaching about the appropriate procedures to be employed in test validation in psychology into serious question. This in turn has the effect of undermining the procedures which would be required to recognise multiple talents.

At this point we should return to Shiva’s argument that our failures in this area are driven by some poorly understood sociological process...

But does that not simply underline the gross ethical failures of psychologists? For why have we, as psychologists, not been studying these forces that have, like the untamed wind, been crashing us, as a species, against the rocks?

But, while the discussion thus far seems to point mainly to the need to move toward the adoption of “illuminative”, ethnographic, methods, one is immediately struck by what seems to be the equally wholesale inappropriate application of these methods. One is tempted to seek to control such mis-use by ‘standards’.

The strength of this temptation suggests that the very idea of seeking to eliminate incompetent and unethical behaviour by means of standards lies somewhere near the heart of our problems. The laying down of standards for checking test internal consistency, validity, and “statistical significance” has inhibited the development of alternatives.

The problem seems to have much more to do with following the crowd, with following the prescriptions of authority even when they don’t make sense, with not challenging the hand that feeds us, with, as Kuhn as well as Shiva noted, the hegemony of frameworks of thought and the control of patterns of funding.

Perhaps, at heart, what we need is not ethical codes and standards, but *processes* which promote debate, multiple perspectives, and exposure to the public gaze. It is not the work of the individual scientist or practitioner which has to be above reproach. It is the process whereby we advance mutual supervision and the joint tackling of problems.

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**Background.** National Psychological Associations, like those catering for many other professions, have widely established Charters, Ethical codes, Standards, and Compulsory Registration procedures with the ostensible purpose of protecting the public from malpractice.

**Aim.** The aim of the present paper is to challenge the underlying assumptions behind such procedures.

**Method.** The paper will explore the unethical consequences which follow from such things as the adoption of the Joint Committee's *Standards for the Evaluation of Educational Programs and Policies* and the procedures for assessing the internal consistency (scientific status ...“meaningfulness”) and validity of psychometric tests recommended in most textbooks.

**Main Contributions.** It will be shown that these result in assessments of both individuals and educational programmes that are insufficiently *comprehensive*. They are therefore misleading – frequently seriously damaging the individuals concerned and the societies in which they live.

**Conclusion.** The way forward is probably to be found by proceeding in exactly the opposite direction to that most commonly advocated – i.e. by funding mavericks who would not be acceptable to the main gatekeepers of the profession – mavericks who will challenge existing assumptions and paradigms and seek evidence for propositions which would be regarded as ludicrous by most of those who currently control research funding, by challenging the assumptions of reductionist science, by creating arrangements to continuously expose the behaviour of all members of the profession to the public gaze, and by requiring members of the profession to demonstrate that they have contributed in one way or another to the radical reform of society.