1987

Wheat and Tares: Responding to Vande Kemp and other Revisionists

James D. Foster

George Fox University, jfoster@georgefox.edu

Mark F. Ledbetter

Western Conservative Baptist Seminary

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac

Part of the [Clinical Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Foster, James D. and Ledbetter, Mark F., "Wheat and Tares: Responding to Vande Kemp and other Revisionists" (1987). *Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology*. Paper 105.
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gscp_fac/105

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Clinical Psychology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Grad School of Clinical Psychology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Wheat and Tares: Responding to Vande Kemp and other Revisionists

JAMES D. FOSTER
*George Fox College
Newberg, Oregon*

MARK F. LEDBETTER
*Western Conservative Baptist Seminary
Portland, Oregon*

In her reaction, Hendrika Vande Kemp (1987) joins other critics of psychology in arguing for a new psychology. The authors believe, however, that psychology developed as a science because it was productive and that more subjective methods will gain respectability only through similar productivity. In her critique, Vande Kemp creates a circular argument by suggesting that the authors' position lacks a proper historical/philosophical perspective, and she underestimates the sophistication of those with whom she disagrees. Finally, the authors disagree that there is no point in arguing with the most conservative anti-psychologists, since they may be having a disproportionate influence on public perceptions of psychology.

Hendrika Vande Kemp's (1987) response to our article on Christian anti-psychology is reminiscent of Christ's parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30). Failing to consider the consequences of their actions, the servants in haste would have destroyed the entire wheat harvest in order to eliminate the tares. Vande Kemp's desire to weed psychology of its scientific roots places her in the camp of those who would remake psychology in their own image and rob psychology of a methodology which has provided a rich harvest for the last century. In Vande Kemp's case, it is an image of psychology reunited with philosophy. Vande Kemp writes that "contemporary psychologists would generate much more meaningful research if they were not afraid to align themselves with 'the old psychology' which was undifferentiated from philosophy" (p. xx). This is reminiscent of the arguments of Van Leeuwen (1982), who

would reshape psychology by humanizing it. She too believes that a born-again psychology would be more productive. But in what way was the old philosophical psychology more productive? Many of the concerns we expressed about a humanized psychology (i.e., uncontrolled error and deception) might also apply to a philosophized psychology. Ultimately, any suggested improvement in psychology must be judged by its productivity in terms of theory or research. In this respect, the humanizers of science, like Van Leeuwen and Farnsworth (1985), would seem to have a stronger position than Vande Kemp in that they can point to research produced through phenomenological methods.

Vande Kemp misreads our argument when she concludes that we assume only one path to knowledge is applicable to science. Our epistemology would appear less "simplistic" if she would note that our position is that "psychology . . . *emphasizes* [italics added] observation, measurement, and experimentation" and that "logic and reason" are a valuable part of the process (Foster &

Requests for reprints should be sent to James D. Foster, PhD, Department of Psychology, George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon 97132.

Ledbetter, 1987, p. 11). We further conceded that "the picture of psychology as a completely objective, carefully reasoned, experimental science has been successfully questioned . . ." (p. 14). Regardless of Vande Kemp's contention that all sources of knowledge apply to science, our point here is that the emphasis on requirements of observation and experimentation have been successful in creating a productive discipline. Other disciplines find different emphases productive and we have no more desire to reshape those disciplines than we have to reshape ours.

Vande Kemp (1987) spends part of her paper expressing discontent with our use of certain terms. For example, she described our definition of empiricism as "extremely narrow" (p. 21), and suggested we erroneously defined common sense as a source of knowledge and that we carelessly used the concept of intuition (p. 21). We could argue that our definition of empiricism was specific and not narrow, that Kilpatrick (1983) does argue for common sense as a source of knowledge, and that if we had used the concept of intuition in a more limited fashion then we would have been subject to the criticism Vande Kemp leveled at our use of the term "empiricism." But instead it might be more instructive to note that conflicts such as these over semantic hygiene often make up responses and responses to responses. These are often reminiscent of a controversy between Edward Titchener and James Mark Baldwin in the early days of psychology (Hothersall, 1984). Wundt had reported a consistent difference in reaction times between motor and sensory responses to a stimulus. Based on his research Baldwin concluded that no such difference exists and that indeed if such a difference existed it was in the opposite direction. Titchener accepted Wundt's finding and accused Baldwin of sloppy methodology. In response, Baldwin (1895) wrote:

The attempt to rule these results out on the ground of incompetency in the reagents (subjects) is in my opinion a flagrant *argumentum in circulo*. Their contention is that a certain *Anlage* or aptitude is necessary in or to experimentation on reaction times. And when we ask what the *Anlage* is, we are told that the only indication of it is the ability of the reagent to turn out reactions which give the

distinction between motor and sensory time, which Wundt and his followers consider the proper one. In other words, only certain cases prove their result, and these cases are selected because they prove that result. (Baldwin, p. 265)

At times it appears that Vande Kemp is arguing that not accepting her historical/philosophical perspective on terms and concepts leads to faulty thinking regarding psychology, thus creating a similar *argumentum in circulo*. And if we find ourselves in disagreement with Vande Kemp we supposedly have inadequate understanding. How will we know when our thinking and understanding become correct? When we accept her historical/philosophical perspective on the disputed terms and concepts!

Even if those who differ in view from Vande Kemp (1987) would overcome their "naivete concerning matters philosophical" (p. 19) it would seem unlikely that all conflicts would magically disappear. Vande Kemp appears to underestimate the sophistication of those who oppose her views. This can be seen in her implied hierarchy of intellectual sophistication. Conservative anti-psychologists are classed as the least sophisticated observers, humanizers such as Van Leeuwen (1982) and Evans (1982) as "more sophisticated observers" (p. 25), and those who think as she does are the most sophisticated. Surely there are sophisticated observers representing a variety of positions on the issues involved.

Our approach to understanding the conflict between psychology and anti-psychologists was to look at different ways of knowing instead of different levels of sophistication. In so doing we tried to avoid the danger of failing to respect the competence of those advocating alternative positions (admittedly this is not easy to do). For example, in his book *The Battle for the Mind*, Tim LaHaye (1980) makes such an error when he identifies the humanist obsessions to be sex, pornography, marijuana, drugs, self-indulgence, rights without responsibilities, and disillusionment with America (p. 136). We suspect that LaHaye would be hard pressed to find humanists who would agree with this characterization. We also doubt whether Van Leeuwen (1982), Evans (1982), or the

conservative anti-psychologists consider themselves less sophisticated observers than Vande Kemp.

Vande Kemp is correct when she assumes we believe modern science is superior to its historical predecessors if by this she means it gives insights in a way that former approaches could not. While we agree that intuition has an important role in science, we believe remakers of psychology, such as Vande Kemp and Van Leeuwen (1982), open the door to subjective sources of data uncomfortably wide. At best it would become more difficult to establish a verifiable reality and at worst it becomes untenable to exclude hallucinations, delusions, and other subjective phenomenon as data.

Vande Kemp's (1987) and O'Donnell's (1979) suggestion that Boring (1950) might have used his history of psychology text in an attempt to shape its destiny and cut it off from its historical roots is not persuasive for two reasons. First, it is no more reasonable to assume that Boring's history text shaped the thinking of psychologists than it is to assume that the text was used because it reflected the thinking of those teaching the history of psychology. Second, the argument that Boring distorted his history to favor experimental psychology in an attempt to persuade is not particularly compelling since he clearly states his intentions and narrowed perspective. For example, Vande Kemp writes "Boring's philosophy of positivism and *bias for experimentation* [italics added] were apparent in his assessment of our history" (p. 22). This shouldn't be too surprising in a book titled *A History of Experimental Psychology*. In his preface to the first edition of his book Boring (1950) further clarifies the limits of his history.

Naturally the words "experimental psychology" must mean, in my title, what they meant to Wundt and what they meant to nearly all psychologists for fifty or sixty years—that is to say, the psychology of the generalized, human, normal, adult mind as revealed in the psychological laboratory. In making this choice I have had no doctrinaire's thesis to defend. Animal psychology is of the laboratory; the mental tests are in a way experimental; abnormal psychology may be experimental. The first two of these subjects I have brought into my exposition in so far as their development was interpenetrated with the growth of "experimental psychology;" but I do not, of

course, pretend to have written an adequate history of either movement. (p. x)

Boring clearly stated his intention to trace the history of experimental psychology as he defined it. Critiquing Boring for ignoring the applied elements of psychology, as O'Donnell (1979) does, or arguing as Vande Kemp that this view of history "especially influenced the older generation of contemporary psychologists" (p. 24) seems unfounded in light of Boring's opening statement of his intentions. Could it be instead that psychology evolved as an experimental science not because of a conspiracy to shape it that way, or because of the historical circumstances (i.e., the depression; O'Donnell, 1979) but because its scientific methodology proved to be the most productive approach? It may be revisionists' interpretations of history tell us more about the writer and the age in which they write than about history.

We agree with Vande Kemp's (1987) contention that the "most conservative of the anti-psychologists who reject all sources of knowledge other than authority" would find no form of psychology acceptable (p. 20). We disagree, however, that "there is little point in presenting an argument" (p. 20). The conservative anti-psychologists have been increasingly vocal in their opposition to psychology and may be having a disproportionate influence on people's attitudes toward psychology. We are particularly concerned with the growing number of anti-psychology books and the effect they may have on the public's view of psychology.

Paul Vitz (1977) published the anti-psychology book *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship*, selling nearly 46,000 copies. Martin and Deidre Bobgan (1979) published another critique, *The Psychological Way/The Spiritual Way*, and sold 17,000 copies. William Kirk Kilpatrick (1983) sold 47,000 copies of his *Psychological Seduction* and Hunt and McMahon (1985) have sold 410,000 copies of *The Seduction of Christianity*. Kilpatrick's critique of psychology appeared not only in book form but also in published interviews (Thorn, 1986) and articles (Kilpatrick, 1986). These books

and articles mix legitimate concerns with extremist views and often attack psychology's fringe (i.e., fad therapies). In these attacks, psychology critics are impacting psychology by discouraging those who may need the help of a professional Christian psychologist.

Dr. Vande Kemp (1987) also suggests that psychology and religion are really addressing different questions. To a certain degree this is true. Nevertheless there are large areas of overlap between the two fields. We are inclined to agree with Gary Collins (1981) when he suggests that psychology and theology have "similar interests and overlapping goals" (p. 15). Psychologists and theologians both deal with "human behavior, values, interpersonal relations, attitudes, beliefs, pathology, marriage, the family, helping, and problem areas such as loneliness, discouragement, grief and anxiety" (Collins, p. 15). This overlap in perceived responsibility leads to competition and may be another root of the conflict between Christian anti-psychologists and psychology.

When Vande Kemp, Van Leeuwen and other critics look at the field of psychology they see an unproductive discipline apprenticed to a stilted methodology and in desperate need of change. When we look at the discipline, however, we see an exciting, productive field rich with theory, research, and application. We are not particularly concerned when scholars such as these criticize the field of psychology since these well thought-out critiques serve to force mainstream psychology into reexamination and self-evaluation, particularly when the discussions are carried out in journals such as this. We are much more concerned with Christian anti-psychologists, however, who are carrying out their attacks in the public forum, since these one-sided attacks are likely to be read by people who do not have ready access to alternative points of view.

REFERENCES

- Baldwin, J. (1895). Types of reaction. *Psychological Review*, 2, 259-273.
- Bobgan, M., & Bobgan, D. (1979). *The psychological way/The spiritual way*. Minneapolis: Bethany.
- Boring, E. (1950). *A history of experimental psychology*. (2nd ed., rev.). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Collins, G. (1981). *Psychology and theology: Prospects for integration*. Nashville: Abington.
- Evans, C.S. (1982). *Preserving the person: A look at the human sciences*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Farnsworth, K. (1985). *Wholehearted integration: Harmonizing psychology and Christianity through word and deed*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Foster, J.D., & Ledbetter, M.F. (1987). Christian anti-psychology and the scientific method. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 15, 10-18.
- Hothersall, D. (1984). *History of psychology*. New York: Random House.
- Hunt, D., & McMahon, T. (1985). *The seduction of Christianity*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House.
- Kilpatrick, W. (1983). *Psychological seduction: The failure of modern psychology*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Kilpatrick, W. (1986). Why secular psychology is not enough. *Imprimis*, 15(4), 1-5.
- LaHaye, T. (1980). *The battle for the mind*. Old Tappan, NJ: Revell.
- O'Donnell, J. (1979). The crisis of experimentalism in the 1920's: E.G. Boring and his uses of history. *American Psychologist*, 34, 289-295.
- Thorn, I. (1986, February). The Failure of modern psychology. *Bible Science Newsletter*, pp. 1, 5-6. (Available from the Bible Science Newsletter, 2911 East 42nd Street, Minneapolis, MN 55406)
- Vande Kemp, H. (1987). The sorcerer was a straw man—Apologetics gone awry: A response to Foster and Ledbetter, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 15, 19-26.
- Van Leeuwen, M. (1982). *The sorcerer's apprentice: A Christian looks at the changing face of psychology*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Vitz, P. (1977). *Psychology as religion: The cult of self worship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

AUTHORS

- FOSTER, JAMES D. Address: Department of Psychology, George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon 97132. Title: Associate Professor. Degrees: MA, PhD, The Ohio State University. Specializations: Developmental and educational psychology, psychology and religion.
- LEDBETTER, MARK F. Address: Department of Psychology, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 5511 S.E. Hawthorne, Portland, Oregon 97215. Title: Graduate Assistant and graduate student in psychology. Degree: BA, California State University. Specialization: Clinical psychology, psychology and religion.