1984

North American Psychology Revisted

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**DISCUSSION**

The second respondent to Dr. Van Leeuwen’s critique of North American psychology is James D. Foster, who teaches at George Fox College.

By James D. Foster

**North American Psychology Revisited**

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen’s article deserves response, I believe, for two important reasons. First, because the article was published in an interdisciplinary journal it is likely to be read by scholars from a variety of fields, many lacking the minimum knowledge of psychology necessary to read the article critically. Second, the fact that it was written by a Christian and published in a Christian journal tends to suggest that Christians should be opposed to experimentation in psychology. A view of psychology from another Christian perspective helps the reader to see all sides of the issues raised by Van Leeuwen.

I will begin by pointing out some of the limits of her arguments. First, she places one limit herself when she specifies social psychology as the basis of her article. While she designated social psychology as a focus for criticizing all of psychology, many of her criticisms do not readily transfer to other specialties. For example, one of her main criticisms is that the use of deception by psychologists has contributed to skepticism and bystander apathy. Using statistics cited in her article we find that 40% of the studies in social psychology use deception, or in other words, 60% do not.\(^1\) Further, according to Stapp and Fulcher,\(^2\) 10.4% of individuals holding a doctorate degree in psychology received that degree in the areas of developmental, personality, and social psychology. Fewer than 10%, then, of all psychologists are social psychologists and only 40% of these are using any form of deception. Van Leeuwen’s criticisms, then, are based on the work of less than 4% of all psychologists.

A personal scan of a variety of journals in psychology will show that the kind of deception discussed by Van Leeuwen is the exception rather than the rule. Even when deception is used it is usually in a much milder form than that

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by Van Leeuwen. Rather than blatant lying, deception is more likely to take the form of simple misdirection, occasional unrelated questions on a test, or an unnecessary scale in a test battery. In many areas of psychological research the general theory is obvious from the method used or in some cases great effort is taken to make sure the participant is absolutely clear as to what is being studied. For example, it is hard to imagine a memory study in which the participant did not know what the researcher was studying.

A second limiting consideration is Van Leeuwen’s narrowing of the scientific method to experimental research. While the traditional controlled experiment is still the core of psychology, its limitations have long been recognized. Psychologists today accept data from several types of studies with varying degrees of control. These range from naturalistic observation (no control or manipulation) through field and clinical studies (some control) to the well-controlled experimental study. The particular type of methodology used depends on the subject matter being studied. Some methods suit certain areas of inquiry better than others. For example, one cannot study attachment behavior of children through controlled experimentation since it would require experimenter manipulation of the mother-child relationship. Instead it is studied using methods requiring less control. If psychologists were to limit themselves to data obtained from the controlled experiment they would find themselves excluding the contributions of such greats as Jean Piaget and Sigmund Freud. A brief survey of textbooks on research methodology would show descriptive research, case study, and quasi-experimental methods being taught along with the experimental method. Any of these methods can be used to gather data in psychology as long as the work is done objectively.

Van Leeuwen’s criticisms, then, can best be understood if they are limited to psychologists who have chosen to use the experimental method, as opposed to another scientific method, to study social behavior. One final comment on limitations: the Van Leeuwen article is entitled “The Unfulfilled Apprenticeship of North American Psychology.” Why she limited herself to North America is uncertain, since the methodology she attacks is basic to Western European and Soviet psychology as well.

The Apprenticeship of Psychology?

The Van Leeuwen article suggests that psychology apprenticed itself to the natural sciences and adopted its methodology without considering the subject matter to which the method was to be applied. Van Leeuwen writes, “ordinarily, a researcher chooses a method after he has chosen the subject matter, so that the method will suit the content of the problem” (p. 304). Does the astronomer choose his method after he has decided to study the stars? Or is it part of his science? Does the biologist choose a subjective approach involving introspection and self-contemplation when studying cell physiology? The only choices that are made are within the scientific method. The physiologist studying brain function in animals can choose between electrical stimulation of the brain or ablation studies, but both of these remain within the scientific method.

241
which is inextricably intertwined with his field. The psychologist studying morality can choose to use naturalistic observation or a quasi-experimental design, but either choice is part of the scientific method.

I would argue that without the scientific method psychology would be indistinguishable from other disciplines. Psychology by definition is the application of scientific method to psychological questions. Those who are studying human behavior—thinking, personality, etc.—but do not use the scientific method can be called philosophers, composers, writers, poets, or theologians, but not psychologists. Psychologists are not slaves to a method who blindly apply the experimental approach to any problem that comes their way; rather, most psychologists have a clear sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the scientific method when applied to humans and continue to use it because of the unique perspective it affords.

The Exportability of Research Results

One of Van Leeuwen’s major themes involves the problem of exportability of research results. She points out that if one uses the experimental method in order to establish a cause and effect relationship (internal validity) then it tends to limit the exportability of the results (external validity). This is a real problem in psychology. When one increases internal validity through better control of the variables, the external validity decreases. Using the Schachter “misery loves company” experiment as an example, in which people were made experimentally miserable to see if they preferred company,3 Van Leeuwen writes:

While we are assured by the nature of the experimental procedure, with its random assignment of participants to groups, that within the confines of the experiment, “misery” was shown to love “company” we have to keep in mind that those who participated in the experiment are hardly a representative cross section of all the people to whom we might want to generalize its findings. In other words there is no built-in guarantee that the findings are “exportable” to similar experimental efforts using any other kind of participants. (p. 301)

Van Leeuwen seems unwilling to accept psychology’s usual response to this criticism, that of doing either naturalistic studies or using replication in numerous settings with different samples in order to increase exportability. Using another social psychology experiment, which staged mock faintings on subways and in other public places,4 Van Leeuwen adds:

Even if several “mock faintings” are staged using different locations, different times of the day and week, and different types of “victims,” the resulting findings regarding onlookers’ helping behavior still cannot be generalized reliably beyond those kinds of neighborhoods, those times of the day or week, and those kinds of victims. (p. 302)

One gets the impression that Van Leeuwen believes there is no such thing as cross-situational consistency in human behavior.

While Van Leeuwen expects us to reject the exportability of research results as being situationally specific, she does not apply the same criteria to herself. When expressing her concern over the faking of emergencies by psychologists and the resulting “boy who cried wolf effect,” she uses as evidence an incident in her office in which a student bursts in to use her telephone having just found “a man lying face down in a pool of blood on an out-of-the-way plaza” near her building. The student is quoted as saying that he delayed in coming because he thought it was “just another psychology experiment” (p. 303). Why is this accepted as evidence when Schachter’s observations are not? Using Van Leeuwen’s logic we would have to limit her “boy who cried wolf effect” based on this one incident to students of a certain age, on a certain campus, with a certain major, on certain days, at certain times who come across men (not women) lying in pools of blood in certain out-of-the-way plazas near certain buildings. What makes this incident more acceptable as evidence that Schachter’s or Piliavin’s work? At least the evidence from the researchers is based on more than one incident.

It is not unChristian to believe that people are consistent. If we believe in a consistent God and if we believe that we are made in his image then we can expect some, although not perfect, consistency in people. One does not have to take a mechanistic view of man to accept cross-situational consistency. A Christian, then, can justify generalizing from research situations. Christian and non-Christian psychologists do recognize the limitations of studies carried out in artificial settings but persist in these studies because the results have some generalizability.

The Use of Deception In Psychology

I too share Van Leeuwen’s concern about the impact of studies which use deception and stress and I am particularly concerned with their potential after-effects. I do not even object to her “horror story” approach to making her point. Making people believe that they are homosexuals, inducing guilt, or lowering the self-esteem of subjects is dangerous and morally and ethically questionable. Fortunately these types of studies are relatively rare, and again Van Leeuwen’s examples are all from social psychology.

As Van Leeuwen pointed out, the APA guidelines do indeed follow a risk/benefit philosophy which permits deception if the benefits outweigh the risks. While this may not be as clear a moral guide as some would like, the approach was adopted to prevent a legalistic, rigid interpretation that could bring research to a halt. While Van Leeuwen is critical of this approach, I believe that she has underestimated the effect of the APA guidelines. West and Gunn predicted that the publication of these standards would change the focus of research in psychology from an emphasis on negative aspects of human behavior to the positive aspects. This may indeed be true, since researchers Capasso


and Hendrick found that research interests in social psychology in the second half of 1975 were running contrary to the traditional research focus. For example, there were nearly three times more research articles on altruism and helping than on aggression. This change in direction may be caused in part by the adoption of the APA guidelines.

Finally, most universities do not allow psychological research to go unchecked. Typically all research is filtered through a "human subjects" committee which is comprised of faculty and administrators from many disciplines. Research that may prove harmful is simply not allowed. Horror stories like those cited by Van Leeuwen have occurred and probably will occur but should not be used to characterize all of psychology or even a significant proportion.

The Effect of Deception on Altruism

Van Leeuwen suggests that the byproduct of studying phenomena such as "bystander apathy," through mock faintings and hoaxes, is an increase in the likelihood that people will not respond in emergencies. They will presume that the emergency is just part of another psychology experiment. It seems inappropriate, somehow, to blame phenomena that are being studied on the people who are studying them. In this case the egg really did come before the chicken. Kitty Genovese was a real person, and her neighbors did fail to respond while she was being murdered. Bystander apathy did exist before it was named and studied. There may be some danger that extensive use of hoaxes would contribute to bystander apathy, but there is also a real possibility that studying the phenomenon may actually reduce the problem. Beaman and others studied people who had been exposed to data on bystander apathy and found that those who had been exposed to information on the subject were more likely to respond in an emergency. Of course Van Leeuwen would probably not accept these data since they were gathered using the experimental method and the researchers did use a hoax.

The Fragmentation of Psychology

Van Leeuwen is correct when she writes that psychology is fragmented and that it appears as if everyone is talking their own game. This apparent fragmentation, however, would seem to be a result of the wide range of interests that psychologists have, the usefulness of their methods, and the multifaceted nature of the human organism, rather than a byproduct of an unsuitable method. Compounding the perceived problem is the desire of journal publishers to appeal to as many readers as possible. In order to do this they attempt to include something for everyone. Reviewing the journals and finding a diverse collection of topics, as Schulman and Silverman have done, reflects both the wide number

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of interests and the habits of publishers and should not be used as an indication of fragmentation. Most psychologists will tell you that they have a difficult time staying abreast of the work in their specialty, let alone keeping up in peripheral areas. Rather than a small amount of research being done in too many areas, we have much research being done in many areas. This contention is supported by the many review articles published and the success of review journals like the *Review of Educational Research* and the *Psychological Review*.

I can agree that psychology lacks "agreed-upon theoretical foundations" which could help integrate the field. This does not necessarily suggest, however, as Van Leeuwen does, that the method does not fit the subject matter. Natural sciences are indeed more integrated, but then they are much older. Thomas Kuhn, who was wrestling with a theory of science, recognized this difference between social and natural science and believed that the difference was explained by their state of development.

particularly, I was struck by the number and extent of the overt disagreements between social scientists about the nature of legitimate scientific problems and methods. Both history and acquaintance made me doubt that practitioners on the natural sciences possess firmer or more permanent answers to such questions than their colleagues in social science. Yet somehow, the practice of astronomy, physics, chemistry or biology normally fails to evoke the controversies over fundamentals that today often seem endemic among, say, psychologists or sociologists. Attempting to discover the source of that difference led me to recognize the role in scientific research of what I have called "paradigms." 10

The greater fragmentation seen in psychology may be accounted for by the difference in developmental stages between the social and natural sciences. Psychology may be in what Kuhn called a "pre-paradigm" phase while the natural sciences are in a "post-paradigm" phase. Applying Van Leeuwen's arguments in a previous century might have led to the conclusion that the scientific method was inappropriate for astronomy, since astronomers at that time could not agree on a model of the solar system.

Miscellaneous Concerns

Other concerns of Van Leeuwen range from legitimate to absurd. For example:

*Concern over the effect of the researcher on the subject.* Here Van Leeuwen is concerned that the self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, passing experimenter expectations on to the subject, further limits the usefulness of results obtained from experiments already tainted with deception. While it is certainly possible that an experimenter could unintentionally suggest a way of responding to a subject, there is no guarantee that the subject will respond in the suggested manner. In support of her view Van Leeuwen cites Robert Rosenthal, who studied the self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon and who concluded that such problems were

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common and therefore not to be ignored. Those familiar with this research knows that other researchers have disagreed with Rosenthal over the extent of the problem and believe that the bias phenomenon itself may not be well established. In either case proper methodological design, using control groups and single and double blind procedures, virtually eliminates this problem.

Concern that psychology is a tool of business and industry. This is voiced as a particularly Christian concern since treating people as potential vote-getters or product-buyers is dehumanizing. I too am concerned when psychology is used to manipulate, but the misuse of science is hardly limited to psychology. The physicist must be concerned when his science is used to produce nuclear weapons, the microbiologist must be concerned when his science is used to produce biological weapons, and the psychologist must be concerned when his science is used to sell sugar-coated cereals to children. Psychology is indeed the servant of business and politics but also of education and mental health; one does not seem to come without the other.

Concern with majoritarianism. Van Leeuwen is concerned that a focus on how groups of people can be influenced leads to “majoritarianism”—a concern for whatever works for the greatest majority of people. Psychologists should be concerned with this, but it is hardly produced by psychology; rather, it is a flaw in Western thought and is probably the basis of democracy. Actually psychology has been concerned with the individual since its conception, and in fact psychology in its applied form deals almost exclusively with the individual.

Alternatives to the Scientific Method?

It is somewhat unfair to criticize an author for a point that was not well developed, but I feel the question of alternatives to the scientific method to be the most important issue. Van Leeuwen does not suggest a specific alternative but does believe that the third force (humanistic psychology) may be the direction we wish to go. Former APA president D. O. Hebb, reacting to those in psychology, like Van Leeuwen, who would have us build a new psychology which does not use the objective approach of the scientific method, writes:

I sympathize with the feeling that scientific psychology, as far as it has gone today, leaves much to be desired in the understanding of man and has little to tell us about how to live wisely and well. I am inclined to think that scientific psychology will always be incomplete in that sense. But the remedy is not to try to remake a science into one of the humanities. Humanistic psychology, I think, confuses two very different ways of knowing human beings and knowing how to live with self respect. One is science and the other is literature.


Hebb goes on to point out that the science of psychology is limited, but that those limits are self-imposed. A science attacks those problems which it is fitted to attack. So when critics claim that the methods of psychology lead to "a neglect of much that is uniquely human," it is because it has chosen not to study this part of humanness. This does not mean that it is not being studied. Van Leeuwen's concern that psychology ignores those qualities which make us human, and therefore produces an incomplete picture, minimizes the contribution of other fields of inquiry.

The other way of knowing about human beings is the intuitive artistic insight of the poet, novelist, historian, dramatist and biographer. This alternative to psychology is a valid and deeply penetrating source of light on man, going directly to the heart of the matter. . . . I challenge anyone to cite a scientific psychological analysis of character to match Conrad's study of Lord Jim, or Boswell's study of Johnson, or Johnson's of Savage.14

If you want to flesh out your understanding of humanness, then you go to these other sources. Psychology should not be criticized, though, for not studying something it never really set out to study. While social psychology may intrude on some of these "humanistic" areas, most of what psychologists study does lend itself to scientific analysis. Those areas that do not will be studied by scholars in other fields using other methods.

Trying to make science to be simultaneously scientific and humanistic (in the true sense of that word) falls between two stools. Science is the servant of humanism, not part of it. Combining the two ruins both.15

Another way of evaluating the subjective as opposed to objective approach to psychology is to look at their relative contributions to the field. Humanistic psychology is certainly not a new development and versions of this more personal approach to psychology can be traced back to psychology's roots. For example, a subjective approach, which took into consideration the concerns that Van Leeuwen has expressed, such as the problem of free will, reactivity, and the difficulty of exporting the results, can be traced back to the use of introspection. This early subjective research technique was abandoned by psychology long ago. Hebb points out that efforts at subjective science go back to such early greats as Kulpe, Wundt, and Titchener, and then asks what have they left behind? In all their subjective (introspection) studies of mind, thought, and feeling, what is in use today? Those psychologists who have had success studying the subjective world, such as Freud on the unconscious, Piaget on cognition, Kohler on insight, Lewin on leadership, and Harlow on love, have all used subjective methods. As Hebb asks, "what is there to cite as a contribution from the subjective method that can be put beside their work?"16

We may get some idea of what Van Leeuwen would like to base psychology on if we examine what she uses for evidence. To support her contention that psychologists are producing hesitancy in emergencies, she cites the incident of

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14Hebb, p. 74.
15Ibid.
16Ibid.
the student coming to her office to use the phone after discovering a man in a pool of blood. During my lifetime I have been present at or arrived soon after a drowning, two hit-and-run automobile accidents, a robbery, two seizures, and a couple of unexplained faintings. No one in any of these incidents ever expressed the concern that it might be just another psychology experiment. One person did, however, wonder out loud if he was on candid camera. Perhaps skepticism in our society should be blamed on Alan Funt. Since I have cited eight personal experiences to Van Leeuwen’s one, does this mean then that I must be right and Van Leeuwen must be wrong? Certainly not, but it does illustrate the need for the objective approach that characterizes scientific psychology.

A second example of what Van Leeuwen uses as evidence comes as she closes her article. There she argues that using the scientific method weakens our higher aesthetic tastes. In order to support this contention she cites two authors, David Bakan and Charles Darwin, one of whom reports personal feelings and the other a conversation with a graduate student. This is evidence? If Van Leeuwen herself was lying on her deathbed and recanted the beliefs stated in her article, are those who adopted her position then supposed to return to the scientific method? Psychology uses the scientific method to avoid the kind of problems that arise when one uses subjective opinion, experience, and anecdotes as evidence.

While Van Leeuwen’s article has heuristic value, it could easily be misread by those outside of psychology. Van Leeuwen, and others like her that have argued for a new foundation for psychology, feel that they can lead us into a fuller understanding of humanness. While they believe that they are breaking new ground, in actuality they are following the well-trodden path of the philosopher, theologian, and creative writer. If psychology is to continue to contribute something unique to our understanding of people, it must follow the empiricistic tradition on which it was founded.