



THE INESCAPABLE NATURE OF POLITICS IN PSYCHOLOGY: A RESPONSE TO O'DONOHUE AND DYSLIN*

DENNIS R. FOX

Legal Studies Program, University of Illinois at Springfield, IL 62794, U.S.A.

and

ISAAC PRILLELTENSKY†

Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5

Abstract—O'Donohue and Dyslin [W. O'Donohue & C. Dyslin (1996) Abortion, boxing and Zionism: Politics and the APA, *New Ideas in Psychology*, **14**, 1–10] discuss the legitimacy of certain political statements made by the American Psychological Association (APA). Their paper makes a significant contribution to the debate over the role of organized psychology in social issues. Although we concur with their demand for honesty in the APA's organizational behavior, we disagree with their conclusion that the APA should restrict its political statements only to those justified by hard data. To believe that politics can be divorced from psychology is to confine the field to artificial boundaries that limit its potential for improving human well-being and social justice. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd.

The American Psychological Association (APA) frequently claims that its public policy positions are based on "science". Is this claim valid? What should be the APA's role—or should it have a role—in addressing significant public policy issues that inextricably mix data and values? How can psychologists ensure that their research and publication efforts do not conceal political agendas? O'Donohue and Dyslin raise important theoretical questions that psychologists of all political persuasions should take seriously. They also make several helpful suggestions for improving the APA's internal policy-making procedures. By elucidating the place of politics in organized psychology and by methodically presenting key dilemmas that require our collective attention, O'Donohue and Dyslin usefully point out the need for more honesty in organized psychology.

While we appreciate their raising these issues and endorse some of their recommendations, we disagree with O'Donohue and Dyslin's assumption that politics can be divorced from psychological research and practice, as well as their conclusion that the APA can and should focus mainly on scientific and professional issues. As we have each argued elsewhere (Fox, 1985, 1993b; Prilleltensky, 1994a, b), in keeping with a large literature developed over the past few decades (Burman, 1994; Kirschner, 1993; Montero, 1994; Richardson & Woolfolk, 1994; Tolman, 1994), politics in psychology is inescapable. Like it or not, public discourse is inherently political, and that includes public discourse by psychologists.

Although we are aware of the danger that research can become merely a vehicle for propa-

*Commentary on W. O'Donohue and C. Dyslin (1996) Abortion, boxing and Zionism: Politics and the APA, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 1–10.

†The order of authorship is alphabetical. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to either author.

gating a political agenda, we believe that this danger is aggravated rather than avoided when we imagine that psychology can be politics-free. In our view, psychologists should identify for themselves and for others the inevitable political implications of their work so that the research—and the politics—can be scrutinized more openly. When we adopt the supposedly objective tone of traditional “value-free” science, we may for a time successfully hide our views, but those views affect our work none the less. As Richardson and Woolfolk aptly put it, “for better or worse, there does seem to be a pervasive influence of cultural and moral values on the methods and results of inquiry in the human sciences” (1994, p. 200).

In examining the intertwined nature of politics and psychology, we briefly discuss below three primary areas of concern identified by O’Donohue and Dyslin: politics and human welfare; politics in psychological research; and politics in organized psychology. We hope our analysis will contribute to the discussion they have begun.

POLITICS AND HUMAN WELFARE

Politics may be conceptualized as the utilization of influence to advance certain public philosophies. People employ politics to promote their values and their interests. Naturally, differing political persuasions and differing visions of human welfare lead to philosophical debates such as those identified by O’Donohue and Dyslin. What we witness in the APA are conflicting versions of what human welfare is all about. But regardless of the particular beliefs held by psychologists, morals and politics are omnipresent, and they will not go away by decree.

The controversy regarding the place of politics in psychology revolves around two main questions: “Can we separate psychology from politics?” and “What kind of politics should psychologists advocate for?” The first question has to do with the recognition that politics suffuse our private, public and professional activities. Our answer is that psychology cannot possibly be separated from the morals and politics of the citizens involved in psychological pursuits. Acceptance of this premise implies a standard of honesty whereby psychologists need to contend with this dilemma. Refusal to admit this postulate may lead to political blinders. The historical roots of neglecting to consider politics as an intricate part of social science practice have been documented elsewhere (Danziger, 1990; Furner, 1975). Suffice it to say that traditional adherence to scientific paradigms borrowed from the natural sciences and insecurities associated with being a soft science, two of the main causes of our political innocence, prevail still today (Danziger, 1990; Prilleltensky, 1994a).

The answer to the second question—what politics we should pursue—depends of course on the social and political orientation of the individuals concerned, but in order to advance this healthy debate we need to agree first that psychology cannot be disentangled from politics. As Levine has aptly observed, “Politics is not wrong or bad. It is wrong or bad only if we blind ourselves to those inevitabilities” (1981, p. 9). Once we come to terms with the inescapable nature of morals and politics in psychology, our discussions will not center so much on whether this is a legitimate argument, but more to the point, on what is the vision of human welfare we wish to prescribe.

Although space does not permit a full articulation of our definition of human welfare, we want to be forthright about our own beliefs and activities, as we believe all psychologists should be. Our orientation to the question of human welfare is informed by such values as self-determination of people, distributive justice, collaboration and democratic participation, and respect for human diversity (e.g. Fox, 1985, 1993b; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). While these values stand

in conflict at times and their definitions are not uncontroversial, we believe they contain the necessary precepts to bring about a more just society. Such a society would be very different from those around us today. An analysis of both emerging and post-industrial societies demonstrates that we are very far from even approximating a desired state of social affairs (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). It was our belief in these values that led us in 1993 to organize the Radical Psychology Network, an international organization of psychologists who believe that political advocacy by psychologists should go beyond positions typically taken by the APA.

We see in the promotion of human welfare a very important mission. We suspect that O'Donohue and Dyslin agree, but we differ in our fundamental assumption regarding the nature of politics and professional organizations. Differences of opinion among psychologists may reside in even more fundamental assumptions regarding the objectives of psychology as a whole. Whereas some may regard epistemological inquiry as superseding in importance moral philosophy, we contend that moral philosophical considerations should not just accompany scientific actions, but should precede them (Osbeck, 1993; Prilleltensky, 1994b). Some may argue that the advancement of human welfare depends on finding replicable laws of human behavior that will neutrally inform public policy. In our view, however, no research finding lives outside the realm of the moral and the political.

POLITICS IN PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Since psychological research does not exist outside the social and cultural context where investigations are carried out, research is simultaneously constituted by, and formative of, the predominant public discourse (Fox, 1985). For example, psychological research has been utilized to promote discriminatory beliefs and policies against children (Breggin & Breggin, 1994; Burman, 1994), women (Marecek, 1993) and ethnic minorities (Bulhan, 1985). We are not questioning the integrity of researchers, but merely observing that the cultural context determines, to a great extent, the questions and the moral repercussions of scientific endeavors. The cultural context of psychology has often included support for a societal status quo that benefits psychologists even as those psychologists work to the detriment of others (Sarason, 1981). Consequently, we cannot accept the search for supposedly neutral data to inform public policy, a position intimated to some extent in O'Donohue and Dyslin's paper. To believe otherwise is tantamount to believing in the possibility of extricating from the social world the persons involved in the research and the information gathered.

Although often useful to inform policy-makers, empirical research cannot answer normative social questions (Fox, 1991). While at times more data are helpful, we should be wary of relying on perceptions of "neutral data" to justify ethical answers. Believing that the answers to philosophical dilemmas can be found in data can lead to the naturalistic fallacy, according to which an *ought* statement is derived from an *is* statement. The statement by O'Donohue and Dyslin that when the APA's political "resolutions are tenuously or not at all data-based, errors are more likely" presupposes that more data can contribute to the right ethical decision. But did psychologists really need more data to condemn apartheid?

This is not to say that research cannot be utilized to advance human welfare. Research methods that empower participants to have a say in the research and allow them to collaborate with researchers can help participants take more control over life opportunities. In other words, research can be used to promote self-determination and distributive justice, as demonstrated in many quarters (Martín-Baró, 1994; Rappaport, 1994). This is different from believing that

research can provide moral answers. Research designed to give participants enhanced control over their lives begins with a value statement that openly declares the principles endorsed. There is already a moral position that utilizes action research to advance the welfare of a certain population.

POLITICS IN ORGANIZED PSYCHOLOGY

It comes as no surprise to us that the APA engages in politics to advance the views of members who are influential in the organization. Every organization is political. Politics need not be defined as an epidemic we need to eradicate, however. Instead, politics is an inescapable reality we need to understand in order to promote human welfare.

O'Donohue and Dyslin make a number of useful points on this issue. For example, they argue that the APA, "by its failure to insist upon compelling evidence before making political positions . . . may be seen as a quasi-disguised political organization rather than as a scientific and professional organization". We agree with this as a descriptive statement. Where we differ is that, for O'Donohue and Dyslin, this description shows the APA's positions to be illegitimate. In our view, as should be clear by now, every professional organization is a political organization.

The primary function of professional organizations is to advance the interests of the profession (Kultgen, 1988). When the APA acts to ensure a role for clinical psychologists in health care reform or to persuade government agencies to spend more money on psychological research, it is acting in the political arena. Although O'Donohue and Dyslin indicate that they prefer an organization that is strictly "scientific and professional", such an organization does not exist. "As psychologists we should be taking a scientific approach", they claim. But the very use of the word "should" makes it clear here that O'Donohue and Dyslin are presenting a value-based argument rather than one that can be justified empirically. The trichotomy they accept—politics, science, profession—assumes that we can disentangle the three components when in fact they are interconnected and mutually influential.

It may be the case, as O'Donohue and Dyslin claim, that an APA position such as opposition to apartheid that is not based "solely" on research evidence "had no added value above other political opinion". But that is not the point. It has no less value, either. Which organization owns legitimacy on opposing racism and repression? When the APA takes a political position, it does not (really) mean all the data are in. It means that (some? most?) APA members make a value decision by whatever process the organization establishes. Psychologists can choose to belong or not. For those who remain, the significant issue is not whether the APA should take political stands, but which stands it should take.

Obviously, there is less consensus among APA members on other issues noted by O'Donohue and Dyslin than there is (we hope) on opposition to apartheid. We do not believe, however, that this lack of consensus should prevent an organization from taking political stands in keeping with its established procedures. The APA, after all, takes stands on non-consensual topics such as obtaining prescription privileges for psychologists. Should the APA wait for consensus on that? Or until there is empirical evidence demonstrating that medicating is psychologically defensible? Many APA members oppose the organization's "professional" advocacy efforts as much as other members oppose its stand on abortion rights. So when O'Donohue and Dyslin note that the APA's political stances "can result in alienating or placing the dissenting psychologists in a difficult bind", we know how they feel. We too have been in that bind, because we believe that the APA's political positions do not go as far as we would like, or as effectively as we would like, to bring about a more just society (Fox, 1993b).

We do agree with O'Donohue and Dyslin that the APA's decision-making procedures should be revamped to make them more open and honest. We would be happy to see candidates for APA President present their views on political issues during their campaigns, which, as O'Donohue and Dyslin noted, does not usually happen now. We would welcome a requirement that "the APA allow and encourage minority and dissenting opinions to be expressed", especially since we are in the minority much of the time. But to claim that the APA should be nonpolitical is to ask for the impossible as well as for the undesirable.

O'Donohue and Dyslin's belief that the United States' political system is a "paradigmatic example" of a "just process for legislation" may help explain part of the difference between their view and ours. Where they see the virtues of "checks and balances", legislative action, and "the democratic process working well", we see inherent constitutional roadblocks to challenging an unjust status quo (Fox, 1993a, b). The assertion that legislative decisions express "the will of the people" (leading to their conclusion that the APA should not challenge legislation it considers to be "uninformed") reflects a traditional view of political philosophy. It does not, however, reflect empirically established fact, particularly given the degree to which political power in the United States depends on wealth accumulated by methods that violate the principles of distributive justice (Schwartz, 1987).

CONCLUSIONS

O'Donohue and Dyslin perform a useful service in identifying policy-making issues that the APA has for too long neglected and in reminding psychologists to engage in a process of value-clarification. We share their call for a more open and honest process. We do so even though such a process might lead to outcomes with which we would disagree. A more "democratic" APA might retreat from, rather than move toward, an active role in bringing about progressive social change. Such an outcome would be unfortunate but not surprising, given the degree to which psychology as a profession, throughout its history, has supported rather than challenged the status quo. If asked, the members of the APA might indeed choose to restrict the organization's public policy stands to those that can be justified by a narrowly conservative interpretation of "the data". But such a choice would be no less political than the opposite choice we would make instead.

REFERENCES

- Breggin, P. & Breggin, G. (1994). *The War Against Children*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Bulhan, H. A. (1985). *Franz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Burman, E. (1994). *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, D. R. (1985). Psychology, ideology, utopia, and the commons. *American Psychologist*, **40**, 48–58.
- Fox, D. R. (1991). Social science's limited role in resolving psycholegal social problems. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, **17**, 159–166.
- Fox, D. R. (1993a). The autonomy–community balance and the equity–law distinction: Anarchy's task for psychological jurisprudence. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, **11**, 97–109.
- Fox, D. R. (1993b). Psychological jurisprudence and radical social change. *American Psychologist*, **48**, 234–241.
- Furner, M. O. (1975). *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Kirschner, S. R. (1993). Inescapable moralities: Psychology as public philosophies. Introduction to special issue. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, **13**, 87–89.
- Kultgen, J. (1988). *Ethics and Professionalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Levine, M. (1981). *The History and Politics of Community Mental Health*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marecek, J. (1993). Disappearances, silences, and anxious rhetoric: Gender in abnormal psychology textbooks. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, **13**, 114–123.
- Martín-Baró, I. (1994). *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* (A. Aron & S. Corne, Eds.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Montero, M. (Ed.) (1994). *Construcción y crítica de la psicología social*. Barcelona: Anthropos.
- O'Donohue, W. & Dyslin, C. (1996) Abortion, boxing and Zionism: Politics and the APA. *New Ideas in Psychology*, **14**, 1–11.
- Osbeck, L. (1993). Social constructionism and the pragmatic standard. *Theory and Psychology*, **3**, 337–350.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1994a). *The Morals and Politics of Psychology: Psychological Discourse and the Status Quo*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1994b). Psychology and social ethics. *American Psychologist*, **49**, 966–967.
- Prilleltensky, I., & Gonick, L. (1994). The discourse of oppression in the social sciences: Past, present, and future. In E. Trickett, R. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (pp. 145–177). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Prilleltensky, I. & Gonick, L. (1996). Politics change, oppression remains: On the psychology and politics of oppression. *Journal of Political Psychology*, in press.
- Rappaport, J. (1944). Empowerment as a guide to doing research: Diversity as a positive value. In E. Trickett, R. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (pp. 359–382). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Richardson, F. C. & Woolfolk, R. L. (1994). Social theory and values: A hermeneutic perspective. *Theory and Psychology*, **4**, 199–226.
- Sarason, S. B. (1981). *Psychology Misdirected*. New York: Free Press.
- Tolman, C. W. (1994). *Psychology, Society, and Subjectivity: An Introduction to German Critical Psychology*. London: Routledge.