

Toward a Free Market in Research Ideas

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Stephen Toulmin, the philosopher of science, called a free market of ideas the best safeguard against intellectual tyranny and dishonesty in science. When scientific theories and research reports compete, the best theories and the most robust findings eventually win over the majority of scientists and eliminate weaker and erroneous research. New ideas emerge to challenge the old in a free market.

Without the free competition of ideas, popularly favored paradigms dominate research funding, journal publications, and scientific meetings. Unchallenged, the dominant theories become arrogant ideologies that suppress dissenting ideas and stifle advances in research. Power, not truth, becomes the prevailing value that guides inquiry. Examples that come readily to mind are Lysenkoism in the former Soviet Union, which retarded their genetic and agricultural research for decades, and Aryan mythology in Nazi Germany, which facilitated the Holocaust.

Psychological science has had its share of uncomfortable examples, such as those dating from the late 1950s through the 1960s, when learning theorists fought vainly to retard the Cognitive Revolution. Concurrently and beyond, extreme environmentalists fought to prevent biological psychology and behavior genetics from becoming mainstream. Ah, but this is the past, you say. Let us ponder how closely psychological science today resembles a free marketplace of ideas, lest we be condemned to relive the past.

At a recent scientific meeting, a colleague remarked sadly that none of the papers he submitted was accepted for the program. Of the hundreds of papers and symposia, none was on his line of infant research (classical conditioning). A decade ago, classical conditioning was a respectable topic. These days, it seems, infants learn only conceptually. Has the Cognitive Revolution become representational tyranny? At the same meeting, poverty and socialization were still treated as pure environmental causes by some, but there was healthy competition from others in sessions on genetic variation in parental characteristics and behaviors. Parents may yet be granted enduring personalities and create environments for their children.

In a free marketplace of ideas, all intellectual vendors have the right to compete to be heard and to persuade others of the virtue of their ideas. At any one time, there are many theories and research paradigms competing for attention (e.g., conditioning *and* cognition; nature *and* nurture). Competitions for funding, space in meetings and journals, and even media attention are all part of the intellectual marketplace. Some psychological scientists focus on questions that require cognitive answers, while others attend to behaviors more conducive to conditioned responses.

Rarely is there only one leading edge in a science. Monopolist theories are dangerous to the future of a science, because they retard the development of new leading edges, which usually arise from quite different conceptual orientations. When intellectual competition is eliminated, one leading edge has a monopoly in the market and suppresses competition for research funding and publication (e.g.,

molecular biology, to the detriment of evolutionary, developmental and behavioral biology, botany, and taxonomy). There is no Anti-Trust Division of the US Department of Justice to protect endangered ideas.

Politically correct ideas are especially dangerous to the intellectual marketplace, because their adherents feel morally justified to suppress dissent. Research, as any other enterprise, is guided by the values and perspectives of the investigators. Science is protected by multiple competing values and perspectives. A few examples from my experience of politically correct monopolies of the research agenda include:

- Victimization theory- the idea that disadvantaged members of society are oppressed and cannot be held responsible for improving their lives- is orthodoxy in contemporary social sciences, although rejected by the vast majority of American voters and policymakers. Research on potential benefits of personal responsibility, self-help, and employment is not encouraged.
- The documented role of substance abuse in high rates of infant mortality and premature births among African-Americans is ignored. Research on equally poor Latinos shows good delivery outcomes, no different from those of more affluent whites. But advocates call for income supplementation and more access to prenatal care rather than mandatory drug rehabilitation.
- Head Start, as it is currently implemented, does not prevent school failure, close the gap in reading or math scores, or improve adult achievements, but researchers recommend expanding it, starting earlier, and extending it into primary school. Competing programs, such as vouchers for parental choice of preschool, are not suggested as alternatives.
- A darling variable of the 1970s, father absence, was eclipsed by “alternative family forms” when feminists decided fathers should not be given special status. Fathers became generic parents. Research on child care in the early years produced no bad effects. With the majority of middle-class mothers in the labor force, a rear-guard action, supported by widely held cultural ideology, is still being fought for the touted benefits of care provided exclusively by mothers. My prediction for the next PC ideology: children will be said to be deprived of child care experience, if they do not attend preschools. Exclusive mother care in the preschool years will be seen as developmentally suspect.
- Racial segregation may yet be construed to support ethnic pride, if enough politically correct spokespersons can be found.

There are surely many other examples of biased research agendas in other areas of psychological science.

Political correctness is the enemy of intellectual honesty and productive scientific discourse. Research funding agencies and investigators know in advance what outcomes are politically acceptable. Temptations to explain away and suppress results abound. The current theoretical orthodoxy, whatever it is, needs to be challenged from many directions—openly and with everyone’s support for a diversity of perspectives. A free marketplace of ideas is the best protection for the integrity and productivity of psychological science.