



The importance of research for the development of psychological science

La Importancia de la Investigación para el Desarrollo de la Ciencia Psicológica



Editorial

Fernando Lolas Stepke ^a * ✉

^a Department of Psychiatry, University Hospital, Head, Interdisciplinary Center for Studies on Bioethics, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile.

In every profession or discipline, three groups of members can be discerned. In the first place, the practitioners, those who represent the true response to the societal demands justifying the existence of the profession itself. In psychology, practitioners can be found in the fields of education, healthcare, economics, and social planning, as members of groups or teams devoted to practical tasks, or integrating consulting or deliberating committees.

Other members of the profession devote their efforts to defending the limits of their practice. They convert the power of specialized knowledge into public authority, regulating who and how those said to be trained in the profession can work in a given area.

In the third place we find those who renovate the ideas and structure of the profession. In the absence of a better designation, we call them researchers. Research is that activity that changes the human capital and the conceptual background of a profession.

Research is, in and by itself, an autonomous activity. Being a researcher implies adherence to certain rules of conduct beyond those that must be honored by practitioners and defenders of the profession. If a common ethos is said to exist, in the case of researchers this ethos must be qualified by certain conditions.

Almost all modern professions owe their prestige to the existence of an accepted knowledge base demanding specialized studies, appropriate socialization in the rules of gathering facts, generating

information and creating valid, generalizable and reliable knowledge. It is this knowledge base that gives professionals the certitude of being accepted as experts by the population at large. On it is based their prestige and the trust deposited in them by society.

Scientific knowledge in psychology is an achievement that took a long way to be established as the sound basis for its practice. Few fields are more exposed to forgeries, false claims of miraculous achievements or cures or wonderful feats of the imagination. Expectancies are so high that people would like to have happiness, health, and wealth just by resorting to the psychological professional.

In order to be socially useful, scientific knowledge must be constructed in accordance with certain values. Values are those features of activities and things that confer them meaning in a given context. In psychology we find instrumental and moral values.

Among the instrumental values, that is, those guidelines that ensure the quality of knowledge, certainly the most important ones are truthfulness, integrity, and respect for peers. These values, and many others of their kind, are the backbone of a good research practice.

Moral values, on the other hand, refer to qualities that complement instrumental considerations. If these can be considered means to achieve ends, true moral values are ends in themselves. A long tradition of research involving human beings has demonstrated that they not always guided research practices.

* **Correspondencia a:** Fernando Lolas Stepke, Department of Psychiatry, University Hospital, Head, Interdisciplinary Center for Studies on Bioethics. Address: Av. Libertador Bernardo O'Higgins 1058, Santiago de Chile, Chile. Phone: +56 2 29782000, E mail: flolas@u.uchile.cl



Sometimes, in the name of science, human dignity was ignored, sordid practices were allowed and suffering was imposed upon innocent or defenseless people.

The first moral imperative in research is technical. Any project not sufficiently grounded on an accepted tradition of inquiry or insufficiently formulated leads to the loss of time, money, and human life. But beyond the instrumental values that ensure technical quality, moral values, those permanent invariants of Western culture so laboriously achieved and perpetuated, are the key to the social standing of the profession, the respect it deserves, and the trust necessary for achieving acceptable ends.

Sound methodology, exigent training, appropriate certification by accredited bodies are preconditions for the good appreciation of a modern profession. In addition, cultural factors must be taken into account. This is better considered from the standpoint of social

relevance. A true response to social demands is always in consonance with the expectations and characteristics of the populations it claims to serve. This is not easy to discern in an era of globalization, but everyone knows what is appropriate and what is not in the place where he or she works. This is also a moral imperative.

Without research based on sound instrumental and moral values a profession is not really a profession with a future in postmodern world. It is just a trade, devoid of the true background that modern developments are so much in need of. In training of future psychologists, some of them must be reserved for the activity we call research: the renovation of manpower and ideas through the creation of valid, generalizable and reliable knowledge.