

Henderikus J. Stam

Professor of Psychology in the Theory Program at the University of Calgary, Alberta

Making the subject matter

To be asked to respond to the mature, almost solemn, reflections of one of psychology's most profound intellects is a task all the more daunting for the sheer intellectual range and erudition so tightly encapsulated in these few pages. My reluctance is further encouraged by that rare feeling of agreement as I proceeded through this essay, a feeling that, in the words of Wallace Stevens, here is someone who can tell us "of things exactly as they are."

For one who came to psychology during, what was proclaimed as, a period of intense optimism founded on the 'new' cognitive psychology, I can only share Professor Robinson's discomfort with all that claims to be new and revolutionary. Indeed, having rejected his message, psychologists have taken Thomas Kuhn's words to heart by reducing his work to the caricature that to succeed one must engage in a process of 'scientific revolution.' Not only is new better, it is also the only game in town. Psychologists' historical consciousness frequently extends only as far as the previous five years of the 'literature,' so much of which is produced that any single person would be hard pressed to read more than the smallest fraction.

Given the opportunity to reflect on Robinson's themes, I will restrict myself to two issues that have inspired a response and might be worthy of further discussion. First, I will engage the problem of professionalism and its relationship to the human or social sciences. That these very sciences have emerged along with the category of the 'professional' merits some historical reflection in the light of what it may mean for the discipline of psychology. Second, I would like to continue the discussion of a problem already articulated by Robinson throughout his article, namely how one might characterize one's reflexive relation to a discipline like psychology, however that discipline is ultimately conceived.

These two issues are related by virtue of the intrusions professionals make into the world of the everyday. Let me elaborate briefly: Professionals claim for themselves a level of expertise outside the realm of common or everyday knowledge ('folk psychology' in the parlance of contemporary philosophy). The more specialized this knowledge, the further removed it is from the domain of the everyday, that is, the more authoritative and esoteric (as Robinson so clearly notes). This in turn warrants the need for professionalization and ensures the privileged position of the professional. It has both positive and negative consequences: on the one hand, it has protected some important areas of practice such as medicine and engineering from meddlesome folk theories and political intrusions. On the other hand, it has created a host of other specialties such as psychology that, although equally adamant in their quest for specialized knowledge, require that they

appropriate the contents of the ordinary and everyday. Although appropriating the everyday is not unique to psychology; the return of specialized knowledge in the form of proscriptions and prescriptions by the social sciences is far more worrisome.

The authority of the psychologist is dependent on the technical nature of the knowledge produced and the authority with which that knowledge can be disseminated and passed on to its clients and new generations of students. That knowledge is interested knowledge; it reflects both the stature of the professional psychologist and the intrusion of that professional in the domains of civics and morality, as well as the aesthetic and transcendental. I will attempt, below, to address this double relation that the professional psychologist has to the knowledge he or she creates. First, it is a relation to the profession and, second, it is a relation to those whose actions are described, explained, or prescribed by this knowledge. That those two relations may conflict is obvious enough but notwithstanding a profession overseen by ethics review boards, the professional can justify all manner of intrusions into the second world by calling on support from the first. Professor Robinson's worry, that these interventions are marked by a characteristic disregard for the truly difficult problems of the world in favor of those that will advance a professional agenda, is arguably the key feature of the self-censorship that characterizes the contemporary social sciences. Psychologists' participation in the world they seek to change through their professional practice is a silent condition for the production of psychological knowledge.

Professionalism

It is peculiar that professionalism, once seen as a guarantee of unbiased scholarship, should now stand in the way of a psychology that could address the civic, the moral, the aesthetic, and the transcendental. To understand this paradox it is important to review the nature of the professionalism that is closely allied to the emergence of the social sciences. This is well-trodden ground, not only by sociologists of the professions but by historians of various stripes. Nonetheless, it is worth reconsidering some aspects of that history for it elucidates the relationship between professionals, their clientele and the academy.

Popular historians such as Daniel Boorstin as well as specialists such as Burton Bledstein have described the way in which the emergence of professionalism was coupled with contemporary notions of democracy in the 19th century. In particular, Bledstein has argued that the impulse to

professionalism was firmly in place in mid-nineteenth century America in part because success as a member of the new middling class depended on providing some service or skill that elevated one's occupation to the level of a profession. Everyone from funeral director to plumber, stenographer to dentist wanted to partake of the new professional status associated with white-collar employment, the kind of employment that provided a service with its basis in the new sciences. As Bledstein contended, "what strikes the historian is the mid-Victorian impulse to contain the life experiences of the individual from birth to death by isolating them as science. . . And the professions as we know them today were the original achievement of Mid-Victorians who sought the highest form in which the middle class could pursue its primary goals of earning a good living, elevating both the moral and intellectual tone of society, and emulating the status of those above one on the social ladder" (pp. 55, 80).

Although exactly what constitutes a professional is rather fluid (see Geison, 1983 for the problems associated with the term), the idea of a profession, or a 'learned profession' is firmly rooted in late nineteenth-century North American consciousness. By the time the American Psychological Association held its first Annual Meeting on December 27-28, 1892 under the presidency of G. Stanley Hall there were already dozens of professional organizations that could serve as a model for the fledgling profession of psychology. This includes not only the major medical specialties (e.g., ophthalmologists organized a society in 1864, neurologists in 1875, dermatologists in 1876) but also less obvious associations for newer sciences (e.g., modern language scholars and teachers, 1883; political scientists, 1889).

Professions were to be understood as the outcome of a process of rigorous education including the mastery of specialized and systematic knowledge, completion of theoretical training prior to the entry of practice and to be embarked on with the granting of an appropriate degree or license (Bledstein, 1976; Gidney & Millar, 1994). The ensuing culture of professionalism came to embody two further characteristics of some import: First, it represented for the professional the development of an autonomous practice, by a democratic and self-governing specialist who, unlike the craftsman, had attained a specialized and esoteric knowledge that would uncover the hidden forces and secrets of nature unavailable to the naked eye. Science provided the special authority for the professional in a way that transcended politics and personality (Bledstein, 1976). Second, higher education, and in particular the university, came to be the workshop of the professional. In particular, these institutions standardized their internal structure as well as training programs and, as they emerged from the 19th century, came to dominate and define professional education, licensing, and most important, knowledge. The new professional curriculum came to be defined by the newly acquired stature of the new disciplines as *theoretical* disciplines, modeled in part, on what passed for disciplinary study in the German university system. Moreover, its clientele was the new middle class that aspired to vertical mobility. Finally, these institutions prided themselves on independence and autonomy.

Although Bledstein understands the relationship between the middle class, professionalization, and the universities as one that is derived from a deeply held belief in democratic values, this is a typical American reading of the development of professionalism. The case in Canada is similar but less driven by an impulse to democratization (Gidney & Millar, 1994). Michel Foucault's understanding of discipline, surveillance and constraint marked a concern for the exercise of power through the reconfiguration of knowledge (Foucault, 1979). Using examples drawn almost entirely from French history, he constructed an argument on the coercive consequences of professional knowledge for those subject to disciplinary powers. This was particularly true in his later works wherein he had loosed himself from his conception of "discursive formations." In this respect, he can be said to have updated Max Weber who had already described the relation between processes of rationalization and the irrationality of Protestant asceticism. For Weber it was the Reformation that ought to be held to account for the creation of new forms of rationality that led to an urban bourgeoisie. Throughout the human sciences this concern for the limitations of professionalization has yielded continuous debate but little by way of change; the power of professional rewards are not likely to be budged by argument alone.

If there is a lesson to these histories, it is perhaps that there is no single lesson but a continuing need to reinterpret the present. In this respect Foucault's claim to be writing a 'history of the present' is indeed a useful reminder to us that we are professionals by virtue of a history of professionalization, a history which is not entirely benign and the understanding of which is not always obvious to us. This history affects not only what we do but also what we say and how we say it, and from it there is no escape. That psychologists should find themselves in this place is no small matter for not only are psychologists at work in the academy but their practical aims include a variety of occupational tasks that insert them in hospitals, the workplace, the clinic, the school, and so on. Robinson's call for relevance is not answered by pointing blithely to the practical applications with which psychologists have already brought their wares to a broader market. Sociologists have noted that professionals have done nothing but benefit from their integration into corporate hierarchies. In particular, they have managed to benefit from the hierarchical structures while astutely avoiding what is euphemistically called "the proletarianization" of their work by retaining a degree of independence from corporate control (e.g., Lipartito & Miranti, 1998).

While professionalization may have supported the democratic impulse and aspirations of a middle class, the downside of professionalization is not only to be found in our history books. Our moral philosophers have not missed their import, the professional goals of objectivity and detachment have been worked out in practice to suit the way that professionals participate in the world (e.g., Addelson, 1994). Objectivity in psychology is an accomplishment achieved through the use of limited research strategies and the use of aggregate statistics that reduce knowledge claims to abstract functional categories; in other words, in the way in which psychological knowledge is produced and organized

(Danziger, 1990). It works to preserve the profession and hence is a deeply conservative strategy. Moreover, Furner (1975) has argued that, historically, professional autonomy came to be used to limit dissent. Autonomy was granted only insofar as most academics could be counted on to stay within the strict bounds of their professions. Other critics too have recounted the way in which professionalization leads to the privatization of knowledge and the constriction of intellectual energy (e.g., Jacoby, 1987).

Reflexivity

This negative portrait of the professions of professional psychology is not something new; critical voices have visited these themes for the better part of the twentieth-century. In addition, alternatives have been proposed only to be routinely ignored. It would be remiss of me not to say that Robinson enumerates succinctly a set of questions that could serve to revise the discipline by orienting us towards questions of history, politics and towards optimal ways of life. The sheer range of potential issues that could move psychology away from a moribund and narrow professionalism are enough to replace all those "research questions" now occupying the vast number of psychologists who toil in the tried and true of their profession. Yet they ask a great deal of the professional: the questions are interdisciplinary in a way that psychology (and contiguous disciplines) would not recognize as legitimate investigations in their domains of expertise. In other words, they require an institutional as well as intellectual conversion from 'business as usual.' That will demand nothing less than courage; institutions pressured to improve on their national rankings and the likelihood of attracting students are notoriously resistant to change.

Personal sacrifice is not the only feature that Robinson's questions will call us to offer up. They also require us to admit that such questions as are captured by the problems of civics, aesthetics, and so on, are dependent on the consideration that psychologists are themselves apt participants in the social processes they seek to address. Although this straightforward consideration has been an obvious feature of psychological inquiry for its history, its implications have remained unexplored. A standard feature of sociological and anthropological inquiries, the notion that one cannot escape the implications of one's participation and *interest* in the features and practices of human life one studies has been buried under the positivist heritage of experimentation and scientism. Furthermore it has been given a bad name by those who, in the name of intellectual honesty, have raised the problem of reflexivity to a virtue if not an end in itself making a truism of the old tale about the native who finally said to the anthropologist "That's enough about you, what about me?" Clifford Geertz termed this the "diary disease."

It was Pierre Bourdieu who noted that reflexivity is not about confessing to the representational biases in one's investigations (of which one can never be fully aware) but about the necessity of theorizing the distance between the

investigator and the subject and to ask how that distance is made possible. In other words, he always sought to understand the possibilities of objectivity in the traditions of investigation and tried to open these to scrutiny. By doing so he attempted to investigate not just the issue under investigation (such as taste, the academy, and so on) but the *possibilities* for knowing. He made theoretical practice as much a problem as other social practices (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It was Bourdieu's contention that it was just those most private and personal features of human existence that were, paradoxically, also their most public. When Robinson argues that "the aesthetic domain, wrongly thought of as private, is consummately *public*, even civic and – in the pristine sense of the term – *political*" (p. 21) I feel that he has connected with a rich tradition of social theory that has nonetheless rarely touched the pristine world of the psychology laboratory. I do not for a moment believe that this tradition has anything resembling complete answers to the kinds of questions that Robinson has raised in his paper but I do believe that others in the social sciences have seen the problems of the political and insisted on the examination of any methodology from the point of view of how and for whose benefit it is wielded.

On this point I do not mean to say that one's interest in particular forms of knowing is the same as saying such forms are strictly determined by such interests, can be reduced to such interests or are forever beyond some criterion whereby we can judge their importance. The production of knowledge is always an intersection of the interests of the investigator and the possibilities of a field of investigation. The latter includes not only what may be considered a 'problem' in the field of studies but the limits of what the intended audience can appropriate and is willing to understand. This makes scholarship, particularly in the human sciences, a conversation between the imagined and the possible. Its subject matter is a feature of the historical conditions of an investigative community. I fear that this may preclude the arrival at any final or 'foundational' formulations even as I take seriously the questions posed by Robinson and the possibility of their answer. There may never be answers to such questions; it may instead be the conditions of their asking that we seek to provide. That alone would catapult psychology out of its moribund state of "business as usual."

In a recent review of Christopher Hitchens's new book in the *New York Times*, the author noted that his subject "has the disadvantage of writing in an age that no longer fears its dissenters but condescends to them, tolerates them as gadflies and offers them a handsome deal" (Packer, 2002). Indeed, it threatens to make them "personalities." If dissent has been reduced to the slightly strange and eccentric, our choices are limited. We can continue to write 'Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas' (to quote Wallace Stevens yet again) or we can ask the difficult questions that nonetheless face, not opprobrium, but deafening silence. It is only by examining the difficult margins of contemporary knowledge that we still see that there are questions worth asking. I thank Professor Robinson for his encouragement to continue to ask difficult questions and to teach uncomfortable thoughts.

References

- Addelson, K. P. (1994). *Moral passages: Toward a collectivist moral theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Bledstein, B. J. (1976). *The culture of professionalism: The middle class and the development of higher education in America*. New York: Norton.
- Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Danziger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline & Punish: The birth of the prison*. (A. Sheridan trans.) New York: Vintage.
- Furner, M. (1975). *Advocacy and objectivity: A crisis in the professionalization of American Social Science*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Geison, G. L. (Ed.) (1983). *Professions and professional ideologies in America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Gidney, R. D. & Millar, W. P. J. (1994). *Professional gentlemen: The professions in nineteenth-century Ontario*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Jacoby, R. (1987). *The last intellectuals: American culture in the age of academe*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Lipartito, K. J. & Miranti, P. J. (1998). Professions and organizations in twentieth-century America. *Social Science Quarterly*, 79, 301-320.
- Packer, G. (Sept. 29, 2002). [Review of *Why Orwell Matters*]. *New York Times*. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2002/09/29/books/review/29PACKERT.html?ex=1034182042&ei=1&en=b30817b816755613.