
Empiricism, Scientism, and Sciolism in Psychological Counselling and Therapy: Reaction to Martin

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After reading Martin's (1995, this issue) thoughtful and innovative essay I was left with two competing thoughts and consequent emotions: On the one hand, I felt my professional conduct has been extensively criticized, and that I have been left beaten and defensive; on the other, as a veteran therapist, researcher, and counsellor educator, who possesses relatively much knowledge and experience in the behavioural sciences in general and counselling psychology in particular, I have been stimulated and triggered to protect my long-lasting professional conduct. Thus, I hereby challenge the validity of Martin's offensive, and propose that his ideas may only facilitate "sciolism," that is, a superficial learning of what psychological counselling and therapy (hereafter psychotherapy) are all about.

It should be noted that the general growth in the consumption of psychotherapy, as noticed by Martin (1995), is a concern of mine too. However, unlike him, I cannot and would not cynically state that this might represent a deterioration in the value of psychotherapy, or the industrialization and commercialization of mental health services. There are two sides to this coin. On the one, the growing prevalence of usage of psychological treatment may represent a changing social mentality, characterized by overvictimization and "psychological correctness" (Sykes, 1992). On the other, however, this may represent an advancement and progress of humanity—only equivalent to computerization, or to physical health awareness—which is expressed by a growth process in terms of more personal openness and acceptance of the legitimacy of psychological interventions (e.g., Kanfer & Goldstein, 1991).

Though I tend to agree with Martin (1995) that our knowledge of the nature and causes of change generated by psychotherapeutic interventions is still loose, and that both research findings and our experience tell us that we have not gained a clear understanding of human change processes, one cannot simply accept his conclusions and implications. For me, what seem puzzling examples related to the effectiveness of psychotherapy such as those cited by Martin (i.e., lack of relationships between therapist's credentials, therapy approach, and length of therapy on the one hand, and therapeutic success on the other) only indicate that change processes and their complex causal mechanisms are not as simplistic, obvious, and unidimensional as they have been thought to be, and that our professional and scientific efforts should rather be focused

on exploring these relationships to further develop our understanding. However, Martin's explicit message that there must be factors operating through these processes which are above and beyond what (existing or still to be developed) scientific methods ought and should be able to explore is unacceptable. Martin did not refute the common assumptions and findings concerning the effectiveness of psychotherapy; he just questioned the origins of this process, thus criticizing our common beliefs that specific ingredients of this or another psychotherapy approach, or other obvious factors, are responsible for psychotherapeutic change. So the core issue—if I am not mistaken—is not “if” psychotherapy is effective, but rather “why” it is effective, which is a completely different ball game. But in order to lay grounds for the “why” question, one should investigate the “if” question first, by using appropriate data collection and analyses methods, generally delineated by science. Hence, there is no room for criticizing psychotherapy research by referring to its gradual approach at understanding the therapeutic change processes. Furthermore, what Martin observed and correctly generalized about psychotherapy research, that is, that psychotherapeutic interventions have been found to be effective regardless of theoretical approach, therapist's experience, and so on, may only highlight the challenging nature of psychotherapy research. That is, instead of withdrawing and questioning the need to investigate puzzling observations, psychotherapy researchers should only double their efforts in attempting to decode what seems to be so complicated. Specifically, common ingredients of psychotherapy have long been thought or shown to be responsible for therapeutic change, whether they were termed persuasion effects using the client's assumptive world (Frank, 1973), placebo effects of psychotherapeutic rituals (Fish, 1973), second-order change processes (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974), effects of the therapeutic relationships (Patterson, 1986), psychotherapy as an interpersonal influence process (Strong, 1968), applications of narrative language (Omer, 1994), and the like. In my mind, closely examining the effects of transtheoretical ingredients of psychotherapy effectiveness (e.g., Goldfried, 1991) could offer a conceptual breakthrough we have long wished for. Full understanding of the placebo effect, for instance, would allow for dramatic developments in the science of human behaviour, and consequently much progress in psychotherapy research.

Martin (1995) presented two arguments in order to substantiate his allegation that the scientific study of psychotherapy is essentially scientism, that is, an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of the natural sciences applied to the investigation of psychotherapeutic process. As Sorell (1991) did in relation to philosophy before him, Martin advocated an expanded application of hermeneutical approach, which is primarily based on experiential, subjective interpretations of the

therapeutic reality, while downplaying methods adapted from natural sciences.

Martin's (1995) first argument referred to the difficulty of establishing causal claims in psychotherapy, due to the complexity of people and our limited methodology. I fully agree with Martin that psychological causality is difficult to detect due to both the super complexity of the organisms we call "human beings," as well as the limited means we have to study them. However, Martin's conviction that the study of humans is different in principle from other elements of nature is unacceptable. I would like to briefly address two points in regard to this issue. First, through the current century we have had much progress in understanding psychological process in general and psychotherapeutic process in particular. Our understanding of human nature has developed tremendously from superficial conceptual speculations and simple behavioural observations to complicated yet valid models, which are capable of explaining and predicting much of the variance of numerous psychology-related phenomena. I do not agree with Martin that our predictions are pediculous, and actually it is amazing how humans' reactions can be highly predictable, from crowd behaviour in a football stadium to a baby's learning of first words, from visual perception to effects of television commercials. I admit, predictions could still be considerably improved, and much variance is still to be accounted for in many instances. However, the general rule is that we have identified many mechanisms responsible for numerous human responses (i.e., affects, behaviours, thoughts), and we are going through a successful process of deepening our understanding, and therefore improving our predictions. I would dare to state that without the devastating and inhibiting effects of Freudian psychoanalysis on psychology and psychotherapy we would have been in a much more advanced position now than we are. For comparison, it could be estimated that we are now in the same spot where medicine was several decades ago; but look at the fantastic development medicine and its related specialties (e.g., physiology, microbiology, genetics) have gone through, and just imagine what our state of knowledge could be in 50 years!

Second, much of our still limited ability to understand and predict human behaviour may be simply attributed to our insufficient, inaccurate, biased, or primitive means, and not—as implied by Martin (1995)—to the subject under investigation itself. Natural sciences could not have made significant progress without the great technological advances which have allowed them to unravel scientific enigmas. These include incredible electronic microscopes and telescopes, extremely efficient computers, and super accurate laser beams. The limited observation and measurement means we possess in the behavioural sciences (which are still developing, as may be exemplified by computerized testing and accurate monitoring of EEG), along with limited statistical methods

(which are expanding too), may account for the significant gap between natural and behavioural sciences as far as understanding and prediction of phenomena are concerned. It is possible that the substantial differences in financial resources available to the two streams of science (which differentially and unjustifiably support natural sciences significantly more than behavioural sciences) may also partially account for the quality of the end products (e.g., accurate prediction). However, in reference to psychotherapy, our research methodology is developing too. Substantial progress has been made in the study of psychological change processes in general and in psychotherapy in particular (Collins & Horn, 1991). Moreover, numerous research methods and means of instrumentation have been developed to allow better scientific inquiry in the area of psychotherapy, many of which were not in existence in the past (e.g., Kazdin, 1992, 1994). In other words, I believe that Martin may have pointed in a wrong direction (that is, to failure in research progress due to essential, principle axioms) when trying to analyze the backwardness of the behavioural sciences over the natural sciences.

Martin's (1995) second argument referred to the role of morality in psychotherapy, which generally overshadows and downplays the relative role and importance of direct psychological interventions focused on client's change as such, which do not question the necessity and direction of change at all. I tend to agree with Martin that the study of morality is philosophical and not scientific (in the empirical sense of this term). I also agree with him that many clients of psychotherapy are bothered with basic moral questions, which are fundamental for their existence and happiness. However, as it was noted by Nietzsche, "There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena." That is, good and bad, right and wrong, or beautiful and ugly, all are judgmental dimensions spontaneously practiced by humans in their need and wish to understand their world. Assuming that these latter motivations serve the natural human quest for happiness, it is only obvious that many unhappy people (i.e., psychotherapy clients) engage in these philosophical endeavours. Although I agree with Martin that the therapist's role and influence in this highly subjective context has attracted relatively little research, there is no doubt that this is a legitimate and highly needed field for growing scientific, not scientific, inquiry. While I do not see the psychotherapist's role as similar to the ones taken by television Evangelists or Indian monks, who seem to own truth, the former can and should engage in helping clients to interpret phenomena along clients' moral value judgments, as well as to help them "reduce" concepts of happiness or love to clearer subjectively defined goals, along a functional, rather than amoral, continuum.

I fully agree with Martin (1995) that education of counsellors and therapists should include readings supposedly unrelated to psychother-

apy or psychology. "Opening one's mind" to ideas or experiences and expanding horizons might well contribute to one's ability to understand people and phenomena better. In the same vein, however, I would also recommend other "mind opening" activities, with possibilities including exposure to cross-cultural experiences, to environment and nature, or to different forms of arts. These could not only promote counsellors and therapists' potential empathy, but by making their minds more open, flexible, rich, and informative, allow more creative and original therapy interventions (cf. Omer, 1994).

What Martin (1995) referred to in associating psychotherapy with scientism could be interpreted as expanding Mahoney's (1989, 1991) equation of radical behaviourism with scientism. However, psychotherapy in general—including its various schools of thought and applications—is much more pervasive, comprehensive, flexible, and ubiquitous than restricted, partial, dogmatic, and specific behaviourism. Moreover, even mainstream behaviourism has dramatically changed over the last decades to form a revised, cognitive-behavioural orientation (Goldfried & Davison, 1994), thus minimizing its scientific nature.

Nature—including human nature—is hard to understand and predict. The reason for that is not that there are mystic powers which govern nature, but rather our limited ability to identify and quantify the existing powers. Sea tides were not understood (and consequently not well predicted) until some decades ago, but now their nature is well articulated, and hence they could precisely be predicted in terms of location, size, and timing. As Martin (1995) noted, and as we unfortunately all know, weather can be generally understood but can only be predicted with limited success. With earthquakes, however, the current scientific status is behind, where understanding of the phenomenon has much developed, but prediction is very poor. Natural phenomena which seemed to be mysterious, erratic, random, or chaotic just a few years ago (e.g., the shape of mountains, the fall of leaves, or fluid turbulence) have begun to be understood and predicted (Gleick, 1987; Peitgen, Jürgens & Saupe, 1992). Moreover, observations and phenomena which were considered mysterious or erratic several hundred years ago (e.g., ability of birds to fly, the language of the bees, or the material of which the Moon is made) seem to be so obvious and simple now. In the same vein, processes of human perception, dreams, or sexual functioning are gradually being unveiled. Admittedly, we are still very far from reaching full understanding of many phenomena, but the response to this frustration should be intensifying our devotion at scientific expeditions, and not withdrawing, as implicated by Martin. None of us, including apparently Martin, would give up the prolonged scientific struggles to reach full understanding and valid predictions of earthquakes. In principle, the understanding of human character and behaviour is no different. I believe that it is only a

question of much time, effort, faith, and commitment which will determine to what extent we will be able to solve the great enigmas of nature. This, in principle, includes human nature in general, as well as the nature of psychotherapy in particular. Giving up empiricism for hermeneutics in mental health conduct may end up only in sciolism, thus dislodging us from the ultimate purpose of understanding and helping.

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