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## Theory and Scholarly Inquiry Need not be Scientific to be of Value

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Jack Martin

*Simon Fraser University*

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### Abstract

In this rejoinder, the central thesis of "Against Scientism in Psychological Counselling and Therapy" is clarified further.

### Résumé

Dans ce ralliement, la thèse centrale de l'article "Against Scientism in Psychological Counseling and Therapy" est clarifiée davantage.

Good discussion, the kind from which one might learn and benefit, seldom is achieved if discussants insist on having the last word on all topics being debated. Thus, I am wary of the current format of exchange that allows me not only to have captured the lion's share of space ("air time"), but now to monopolize the concluding commentary. In general, I want to temper the impulse to respond to the various points raised in the responses of Azy, Beth, Frank, and Linda in ways that advance my ideas at the expense of their views. After all, readers are entirely capable of coming to their own conclusions with respect to matters about which we seem to agree and disagree, without additional direction from me.

It is an honour to have knowledgeable, capable individuals read and consider one's views carefully, and give time and energy to the creation of thoughtful commentary in response to what one has attempted to say. I am grateful to the editor and to each of the responders for taking my views seriously, and am pleased that the responders have been able to include important views of their own in their commentaries. Issues such as the nature of human psychotherapeutic experience and its appropriate modes of study, the kinds of relations that might pertain between practitioners' and researchers' understandings and knowledge of psychological counselling and therapy (hereafter psychotherapy), the most appropriate ways to educate researchers of psychotherapy, and the nature and significance of spirituality in psychotherapy practice and research, are important avenues for further theoretical and empirical investigation. In these, and many other ways, studies of psychological counselling and therapy will continue to contribute to our knowledge about ourselves.

What I do want to do in this rejoinder is to elaborate my central thesis and concern in an attempt to make it as clear as possible. I feel justified in doing this because I believe that it is almost impossible to overestimate

the pervasive attraction and influence of science in modern life. For many of us counsellors and psychologists, what is at stake with respect to the identification of psychological studies with science, extends well beyond academic and professional credibility, to encompass matters of personal identity and worth. This is not really surprising in light of the undeniable advances that might reasonably be attributed to scientific work from the Enlightenment to the present. I tend to agree with Hempel's (1965) assessment of this progress:

Our age has often been called an age of science and scientific technology, and with good reason: the advances made during the past two centuries by the natural sciences, and more recently by the psychological and sociological disciplines, have enormously broadened our knowledge and deepened our understanding of the world we live in and of our fellow man; and the practical application of scientific insights is giving us an ever increasing measure of control over the forces of nature and the minds of men. (p. 81)

As I attempted to say in my article, I am not against science, nor am I necessarily against the application of many of the methods and principles of science in psychology or psychotherapy research. There are scores of legitimately empirical questions in psychology and psychotherapy that might be informed by relevant evidence, systematically collected, and carefully considered. Insofar as scientific methods and frameworks of justification enable such mustering of evidence, I am a strong supporter of them.

However, I believe that there are important, undeniable limitations to the application of physical science methodologies and epistemologies to the study of humans and their experiences and actions in general, and in psychotherapy in particular. My core argument is that because of the nature of their subject matter, psychological theory and research cannot be entirely or only scientific, in the manner of physical science. The inevitable causal uncertainty and moral saturation of human experience and action require modes of scholarly study in addition to those of physical science, if a progressive understanding of this subject matter is to be achieved.

The relevant, appropriate incorporation of interpretive, narrative, philosophic, aesthetic, and other potentially viable modes of inquiry within psychology need not mean the abandonment of those modes of empirical inquiry favoured by psychological scientists. Further, there is no good reason to suppose that these added modes of inquiry cannot be intellectually systematic and rigorous, and must necessarily be either intuitive or subjective (in the pejorative sense of these terms). The reflective, critical, and conceptual rigour found in much contemporary work in philosophy and the humanities where such methods are employed does not warrant charges of sciolism. (Of course, it is possible to find sloppy, ill-considered work in these areas, as it is to find similar work that adopts only a patina of science.) To me, the suggestion that these

additions to the repertoire of psychologists' tools of theoretical development and inquiry somehow will produce inferior or more superficial knowledge reflects exactly the kind of overvaluing of science in the presence of good reasons not to do so, with which I am concerned.

I remain concerned that we counsellors and psychologists have over-identified with the epistemologies and methodologies of physical science, even when we have good reason to suspect that the nature of our subject matter imposes constraints and limitations on what might be known by these frameworks and methods alone. In this, I believe we follow a larger society overly enamoured and insufficiently critical of scientific and technological rhetoric. I believe further that future, genuine progress in psychology, and in the study of psychological counselling and therapy, is more likely to be achieved if psychology is conceived less as a kind of physical science than as a more broadly-based scholarly discipline. By extending its array of conceptual, empirical, and critical methods and strategies in ways that respect the primacy of its subject matter, psychology might progress through a more open, multifaceted, and increasingly rigorous pattern of theory formulation and critique (conceptual and empirical).

My vision is one of psychological studies as a far-reaching scholarly activity in which we counsellors and psychologists will identify ourselves as scholars and scholar-practitioners, willing and able to subject our most cherished theories and methods to the most challenging conceptual, empirical, and moral criticisms we can muster—an activity in which reasons, arguments, and evidence overshadow dogmatic attachments to scientific, and any other overstated, doctrines and postures. What really is at stake is our understanding of ourselves and the nature and consequences of our experiences and actions. Surely, this is what psychology and psychotherapy are about.

### *References*

Hempel, C. (1965). *Aspects of scientific explanation*. New York: Free Press.