

Contemporary Psychology: APA Review of Books
0010-7549
August 2004, Vol. 49, No. 4, Pg. 491 - 494

The End of Psychology?

Review of: *Modernizing the Mind: Psychological Knowledge and the Remaking of Society*.
(2002)

Steven C. Ward

Westport, CT: Praeger/Greenwood ISBN: 0-275-97450-2, 279 pp. \$39.95

Thomas Teo

About the author(s):

STEVEN C. WARD, Department of Social Sciences, Western Connecticut State University.
THOMAS TEO, Department of Psychology, History and Theory of Psychology Program, York
University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada. E-mail: tteo@yorku.ca

Why was psychology so successful in 20th-century America? Psychologists socialized within its traditions might answer "because of the causal explanation of mental life," or "because psychology applied the methods of the natural sciences to human experience," or "because it discovered laws of human behavior when it was transformed from a philosophical to an objective, value-neutral, nomological enterprise." However, since Kuhn (1962), psychologists have understood that the dynamics of a discipline are more complex than internal problem solutions. Challenging the sociology of knowledge, Ward goes a step farther when he recommends analyzing knowledge as "a multitude of local practices" (p. 233). In the reconstructions he relies on studies that have been published in the latest science studies, on authors, such as Bruno Latour, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Anthony Giddens, and many others. Well aware that some of the most remarkable recent studies on the history and theory of psychology come from outside the discipline, Ward, who does not neglect traditional historical scholarship, draws on Nicolas Rose (sociologist), Ian Hacking (philosopher), Martin Kusch (historian and philosopher of science), and Kurt Danziger (psychologist).

Ward himself is a sociologist, an outsider, which allows him a fresh perspective for answering questions concerning psychology and perhaps a certain "objectivity." I will use an example from psychology to highlight this point: Parents are an important source for understanding the development of their children, but parents cannot be a privileged source of information for development in general because they are invested in their children's growth. Thus, researchers aim for independent sources of information regarding the progress of children. Similarly, one could argue that psychologists are invested in their field too deeply, which prevents them from seeing movements that an outsider might observe. Ward, who takes a critical stance toward psychology without being critical of psychology, has no need to identify with the discipline and recognizes issues that psychologists just rationalize. Yet, as an outside expert he might not understand what an "insider" comprehends, he might not "feel" the true complexity of psychology, and his lack of empathy might do nothing for the discipline's advancement.

Using such a parent-child metaphor is exactly what draws Ward's attention and is a source of investigation. He would subsume such a metaphor under what he calls "being psychological"—meaning that psychology's concepts, theories, and techniques guide North American life and constitute what it means to be modern. The *psychologization* of reflection (explaining personal, social, political, and intellectual problems using psychological concepts) is one expression of psychology's success. What were the reasons for psychology's success in 20th-century America? Ward argues that psychology was successful not because it applied a natural science methodology to mental phenomena, but because it moved from isolation at universities to form alliances with organizations and groups throughout the United States. The lack of unification, lamented by many psychologists (myself included; see Teo, 1999), is not seen as a source of decline but a source of success: "Although psychology was often condemned for being

disorganized and unfocused, this lack of focus actually gave it the flexibility needed to remake itself continuously in the image of its allies" (p. 223), which included educators, industrialists, parents, and so on.

The book is largely dedicated to understanding the process of forming alliances and psychology's making of modern society. Ward conceptualizes modern society as a knowledge society, but he rejects traditional progressive (cumulative), critical (e.g., feminist), but interestingly also social constructionist epistemologies, while promoting a genuine social history of knowledge that "requires us to follow knowledge as it travels the long road from fragile beginnings to an indisputable and widespread truth" (p. 17). Ward suggests that knowledge is not the privileged result of science, whereas at the same time, he emphasizes that certain forms of knowledge are more recognized than others. The reason being is that "if a position has been successful in recruiting a large number of allies...and can sustain those alliances in the face of the efforts of adversaries to unravel it, the network becomes strong, and the position becomes true" (p. 19). For example, knowledge becomes successful when clinical patients use the same terminology as experts. Successful knowledge is organized, reproduced, protected, and evolves into new knowledge in vast networks of support, and, according to Ward, "psychological truths are dependent upon the maturity of psychology's network of support rather than on the maturity of its knowledge" (p. 56).

The alliance of psychology with the natural sciences is, according to Ward, a political decision because "it makes no sense to attach oneself to fields that are weak" (p. 56), meaning to philosophy and the humanities. At the same time psychology excluded "charlatans, quacks and ignoramuses" (p. 43) to draw the border between members and nonmembers of the discipline. However, from the perspective of psychiatry, psychologists were charlatans and Ward provides many historical examples to demonstrate those struggles. To be successful psychology formed alliances with practical fields. Pioneers of psychology (James, Hall, Dewey, Thorndike, Cattell) exported psychological knowledge to teaching and psychologists moved into departments of education, promoted school counseling, and introduced psychological tests of intelligence and personality, in the process of which testing spread all over North America.

Psychology became a commodity that required marketing, advertising, the fabrication of demand, services, and the selling of products (see p. 85). Ward identifies psychology's role in the control of adolescent sexuality, the advent of child-care manuals, the promotion of parent magazines, and the marketing of self-esteem. The sexual domain was used "to establish an opening with respect to parenting concerns and child-care issues" (p. 92), with the result that parenthood, parents, and children were psychologized. Another factor in psychology's success was what Ward calls psychology's transportability in material form, meaning that psychology produced machines and measures that (according to psychologists) could not properly be interpreted by nonpsychologists. Together with laboratories, they contributed to the acceptance of psychology as an experimental science. They concentrated resources and researchers and showed the public, as well as academia, that psychology is more than philosophical reflection because its theories are materialized in "brass and steel" (see p. 118). This in turn reinforced the dephilosophizing (see p. 124) of psychology. Drawing on Durkheim, Ward suggests that laboratories, machines, and measures are part of a ritual that maintains psychology's collective identity.

Ward also provides a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between psychology and the public, viewing psychology's strategies to promote the scientific approach to lay and professional audiences as part of its success. He is well aware of the chasm in the field between purists (keeping psychology a university centered science; e.g., Titchener) and populists (applying psychology to everyday problem; e.g., Muensterberg), and provides a very detailed analysis of the popular press (e.g., *Psychology Today*), pop-psychology literature such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1993), the advent of psychological TV, including the successes of Oprah Winfrey and Phil McGraw. The dilemma of psychology consists in the intent of being a serious science, whereas the popularization contributed largely to its success. Ward

also includes an analysis of the psychologization of corporations (therapeutic corporations; e.g., drawing on the Hawthorne studies; see Mayo, 1933), the establishment of psychological codes of civility in family life, and, in fact, the psychological colonization of every aspect of life. Psychology has become more of a life philosophy than a branch of knowledge (see p. 231).

This is an excellent book that I recommend to every psychologist. It is certainly a must-read for every graduate student in psychology. It is well written, finely articulated, and organized; it provides a large and systematic literature overview; and it contributes to a better understanding of the development of psychology as a field. Of course, such an endorsement does not mean that one should agree with every argument Ward develops. From a less radical perspective than Ward's, one would have to assess that the depth of knowledge is sometimes neglected for the breadth of knowledge. For example, his short overview of the history of intelligence testing paints a historical caricature rather than an accurate picture (see pp. 69–75). He also underestimates and neglects the role of behaviorism in the history of 20th-century American psychology (he never mentions the academically and publicly influential Skinner; see, e.g., Rutherford, 2003). From a more radical perspective, one could argue that Ward does not address sufficiently the alliance of psychology with politics, including the collaboration of psychologists with segregationist, anti-immigration, anticivil rights, and antiemancipation groups, and thus is not really capable to develop a postcolonial social history of psychology. Ward fittingly criticizes certain forms of social constructionism, such as the idea that there is nothing beyond a text or that truth is solely a discursive creation. Indeed, as Ward points out, one must study the material realizations of constructions. Unfortunately, Ward himself relies heavily on published sources (texts) and does not research those material creations himself—a critique that might seem harsh based on his extensive reading and convincing use of literature. In addition, to identify whether a certain factor is more or less crucial in contributing to psychology's success in the United States, Ward could have compared factors of success (or lack thereof) in countries such as Germany.

If one takes Ward seriously, then psychological life philosophy has produced a paradoxical situation for academic nonclinical psychologists. Academic psychologists are often opposed to the notion of the popularization of psychological knowledge, and the application, politics, and practice of psychology; yet, they (we) are joy riders or hitchhikers of what has happened in the public sphere with regard to the “psydisciplines.” Academic psychologists realize, of course, that most students do not study psychology to learn about statistics, ophthalmology, or about Herbart's (1816) fusions—to use an example from the history of psychology. Students are motivated by psychology's cultural representation in various mass media. Thus, one must thank Dr. Phil for his contribution to maintaining public interest in psychology, whereas he is also the reason why some academic psychologists do not want to be labeled psychologists anymore.

Ward draws another important conclusion based on his historical reconstruction: “psychological knowledge would live on even if the discipline of psychology did not” (p. 228). However, what Ward considers a hypothetical scenario is, in my opinion, a real trend in psychology: distancing academic psychology from practical problems, an uneasiness with applied fields, the repression of the political context of psychology, and a contempt for social issues, while moving to topics and levels of mental life that allow for a strictly natural scientific study. As necessary as these areas and as “reasonable” the refuge from psychological “junk” may be, research on these levels is not sufficient for an understanding of the content of the human psyche. Scientific salvation will not be possible by rejecting alliances with public interests and by moving into related fields, such as biology, computer science, linguistics, genetics, neuroscience, and so on. In the 19th century there was a psychology without a soul, in the 20th century there was a psychology without subjectivity, and in the 21st century there may be a psychology without psychology. Indeed, such a development would mean the end of psychology.

References

1. Gray, J., (1993) *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, New York: Harper Collins.
2. Herbart, J. F., (1816) *Lehrbuch zur Psychologie*, Knigsberg, Germany: Unzer.

3. Kuhn, T. S., (1962) *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. Mayo, E., (1933) *The human problems of an industrial civilization*, New York: Macmillan.
5. Rutherford, A., (2003) B. F. Skinner's technology of behavior in American life: From consumer culture to counterculture, *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 39, 1-23.
6. Teo, T., (1999) Functions of knowledge in psychology, *New Ideas in Psychology*, 17, 1-15.