

Lecture 5:  
Critiquing Pop Psychology: Invalid  
Techniques, Misconceptions, Media  
Psychologists, and Self Help Books

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Pop Psychology

- **Pop Psychology** refers to ideas thought to be based on scientific psychology that attain popularity among the general population.
  - The term is often used in a derogatory manner, to describe concepts that are oversimplified, out of date, unproven, misunderstood or misinterpreted
    - The term is also used to describe professionally-produced psychological knowledge, regarded by most experts as valid and effective that is intended for use by the public.
  - But typically, pop psychology is often a business designed to make money, rather than a pursuit of scientifically valid knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Pop Psychology

- Pop psychology comes in multiple forms
  - Methods that are popular despite being scientifically disproved or (at least) questioned.
    - Why does the label of a pseudoscience not affect the popular perception of certain techniques?
  - Advice dispensed through radio, TV, and print.
    - Are Phil, Laura, and Abby doing therapy?
  - Myths and Misconceptions, which may include concepts and terms that are unused in the discipline
    - People use only about 10% of their brains' capacity.
    - Nervous breakdown, inner child.
- Self help books!

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Pop Psychology

- We will review each of these aspects of Pop psychology.
  - The focus will be how each aspect negatively impacts the image of psychology
    - The negative impact supports the belief held by many and for a long time that psychology is not a science.
  - We will also focus on has been done by the APA to minimize such impact.
    - We will examine the successful and unsuccessful attempts to "give psychology away"
- The goal is for you to become more critical about the popularizations of the discipline.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### B. The Image of Psychology

- To many, pop psychology is the face of the discipline of psychology itself.
  - Rows upon rows of untested or ineffective self help books which have been around for a long time
  - To most, Freud, Dr. Laura and Dr. Phil are the only psychologists they know! (Einstein only Physicist)
  - A Google search of the term *parapsychology* returned 2 million hits whereas a search of the terms "*scientific psychology*" returned 250,000 hits.
- Psychology is seen by most as a frivolous pseudoscience rather than a serious sciences

## I. INTRODUCTION

### C. Pop Psychology and the APA

- In his 1969 APA presidential address, G. Miller (1969) made a case for *giving psychology away*.
  - Our responsibility is less to assume the role of experts and try to apply psychology ourselves than to give it away to the people who really need it - and that includes everyone. The practice of ***valid psychology*** by non-psychologists will inevitably change people's conception of themselves and what they can do. And when we have accomplished that, we will really have caused a psychological revolution.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### C. Pop Psychology and the APA

- Farley (APA President, 1994) valued giving psychology away as a way to cure the negative impact of Pop Psychology on the discipline.
  - "The profession has been hurt by the media-stoked image of "pop psychology" and the use of terms such as "psychobabble."
  - To him, the antidote for these negative images is more public exposure of knowledgeable, articulate psychologists with research-backed interpretations of human behavior.
- Its assumed that giving psychology away will improve society's view of the discipline.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### D. Pop Psychology and Scientific Psychology

- But does promoting scientific psychology improve society's view of the discipline?
  - I am skeptical:
    - Its difficult to get people to see psychology as scientific.
      - Misconceptions of the discipline are hard to change and invalidated practices remain popular.
      - The media stars of the discipline are not the best spokespeople.
      - Even upper-division Psychology Students hold misconceptions
      - Self help industry is not evidence-based practice.
  - Can the social problems associated with pop psychology can be changed by giving psychology away?

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### A. Introduction

- Some methods or techniques have been invalidated or challenged by research and questioned by the APA.
  - This should have completely undermined such methods.
  - But in some cases they remain popular!
- Three case in points
  - Neuro-linguistic Programming
  - Facilitated Communication
  - Dianetics and Scientology

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### B. Neurolinguistic Programming

- **Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)** began as a form of pop therapy (from Wikipedia)
  - It is the theory of how language, communication and thought are connected with implications for a therapeutic method.
    - Holds that people can improve the way they interact by means of certain principles and techniques concerning their language.
  - It claims that people can use NLP principles and techniques to represent their world better, learn and communicate better, and ultimately have better, fuller, and richer lives.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### B. Neurolinguistic Programming

- Originally promoted as an extraordinarily effective and rapid form of psychological therapy
  - Capable of addressing the full range of problems which psychologists are likely to encounter,
    - It also espoused the potential for self-determination through overcoming learned limitations and emphasizing well-being and healthy functioning.
  - Later, it was promoted as a 'science of excellence',
    - It was claimed that NLP skills can be learned by anyone to improve their effectiveness both personally and professionally.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### B. Neurolinguistic Programming

- No firm evidence supported its claims
  - NLP has enjoyed little or no support from the scientific community (see [Heap, 1988](#))
    - It continues to make no impact on mainstream academic psychology, and only limited impact on mainstream psychotherapy and counseling.
  - Some influence to the extent that therapists claim to be trained in NLP and 'use NLP' in their work.
  - It has influencing in management training, life coaching (<http://rewritingmylife.com/index.html>), and the self-help industry.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### C. Facilitated Communication

- **Facilitated communication (FC)** is a process by which a facilitator supports the hand or arm of a communicatively impaired individual while using a keyboard or other devices. (From Wikipedia)
  - helping the individual to develop pointing skills and to communicate.
  - Proponents of FC suggest that some people with autism and moderate and profound mental retardation may have "undisclosed literacy", or the capacity for other symbolic communication, consistent with higher intellectual functioning than has been presumed.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### C. Facilitated Communication

- The procedure has been discredited for autistics
  - A majority of peer reviewed scientific studies conclude that the typed language output attributed to the clients is directed or systematically determined by the therapists who provide facilitated assistance.
  - The APA issued a [resolution](#) in 1994 that there was "no scientifically demonstrated support for its efficacy."
    - This evidence was also widely disseminated in many media outlets including 60 minutes, Frontline, and other places.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### D. Dianetics and Scientology

- **Dianetics** set of ideas and practices regarding the relations between the spirit, mind and body.
  - Written by L. Ron Hubbard in 1950.
    - L Ron Hubbard is also the founder of Scientology which is based in part on Dianetics.
  - Theory holds that the mind has three parts: the conscious "analytical mind," the subconscious "reactive mind," and the somatic mind.
    - The goal of Dianetics then is to remove the reactive mind that would prevent people from becoming more ethical, more aware, happier and saner.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### D. Dianetics and Scientology

- In 1950, APA adopted the following resolution:
  - In view of the sweeping generalizations and claims regarding psychology and psychotherapy made by L. Ron Hubbard in his recent book "Dianetics," the American Psychological Association adopts the following resolution: While suspending judgment concerning the eventual validity of the claims made by the author of "Dianetics," the association calls attention to the fact that these claims are not supported by empirical evidence of the sort required for the establishment of scientific generalizations. In the public interest, the association, in the absence of such evidence, recommends to its members that the use of the techniques peculiar to Dianetics be limited to scientific investigations designed to test the validity of its claims.

## II. INVALIDIDATED METHODS

### E. Persistence of Invalidated Methods

- The only invalidated method which seem to have resulted in a decrease in popularity is Facilitated Communication.
  - Not only was it proven wrong, it was done so on 60 Minutes, Frontline and other media outlets.
- Evidence is necessary, but dissemination of the evidence in the media seems critical as well!
  - Do psychologists disseminate scientific information in the media?
  - Which psychologists do you know on TV, Radio, and Newspapers?

## III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

### A. Psychology in the Media

- Where would someone get psychological information in the media (TV Radio, Newspapers)?
  - TV – Dr. Phil
  - Radio – Dr. Laura
  - Newspapers – Dear Abby
- Do these disseminators of psychology in the media *do therapy* or do they *offer advice*?
  - What is the difference between them?
- Are any of these media darlings a psychologist?
  - Do they disseminate scientific psychology?

## III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

### B. Giving Advice and Doing Therapy

- What is the difference between giving advice and doing therapy?
  - There are multiple ways in which they are similar.
    - People seeking therapy or advice have problems or concerns and want to be helped.
    - Therapy and advice may each be effective or fail to be effective.
    - Therapy like advice can be delivered over a medium
    - Each involve a very short-term relationship between an adviser or therapist and those seeking advice or therapy.
    - Therapists and advisors may be trained or more or less competent.

## III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

### B. Giving Advice and Doing Therapy

- Only one way I can think that differentiates between giving advice and doing therapy.
  - Advice is a *personal opinion* about what a person or group could or should do in any given situation to solve problems, seek strategies, or find solutions from a social or personal standpoint.
  - Therapy is a *prescribed process* which remediates (prevents, treats, or cures) a diagnosed problem.
- A therapist is responsible for the process whereas an adviser is not responsible for the opinion (the advice can be taken or ignored).

### III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

#### C. The Faces of Psychology in the Media

- Do those who dispense psychology do scientifically-based psychology?
- Dear Abby probably just dispenses advice.
  - **Dear Abby** is the name of the newspaper column founded in 1956 by Pauline Phillips under the pen name, Abigail Van Buren, and carried on today by her daughter, Jeanne Phillips, who now owns the legal rights to the pen name.
  - Neither is trained as psychologist and often confer with psychologist and refer advice-seekers for therapy.

### III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

#### C. The Faces of Psychology in the Media

- Dr. Laura probably straddles the line between therapy and advice.
  - **Dr. Laura Schlessinger** is host of a nationally-syndicated radio show, *The Dr. Laura Program*.
    - She earned a Ph.D. in physiology not psychology but has an inactive California-based Marriage, Family and Child Counseling (MFCC) license.
    - Much of her advice is identified as politically socially conservative and religious-based
    - She has written multiple self-help books.
    - She does not diagnosis, and recommends callers undergo psychological or psychiatric assessment.

### III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

#### C. The Faces of Psychology in the Media

- Dr. Phil probably does therapy, although his web site specifies it is for informational and entertainment purposes only
  - **Dr. Phillip McGraw** is a psychologist, author, and host of the *Dr. Phil Show*.
    - He has a M.A. in experimental psychology and a Ph.D in clinical psychology from the University of North Texas.
    - His advice seems consistent with CBT which identifies (diagnosis) and changes (therapy) dysfunctional thoughts, assumptions, beliefs and behaviors.
    - However, he does not committed to the scientist-practitioner model with its emphasis on measurable goal-attainment.

### III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

#### D. Problems and Concerns.

- Concerns abound about both Dr. Phil and Laura.
- Dr. Phil was sanctioned in 1989 for an inappropriate "dual relationship" with a female therapy client.
  - McGraw has not completed the conditions imposed by the Board of Examiners of Psychologists in Texas and he is not licensed to practice psychology anywhere,
- In January, 2008, McGraw was subject of a complaint with the California Board of Psychology.
  - He allegedly practiced clinical psychology without a license by discussing with the media a visit he had with Brittany Spears while she was hospitalized



### III. MEDIA PSYCHOLOGISTS

#### D. Problems and Concerns.

- Dr. Laura also had problems.
  - Schlessinger negatively characterized the sexual behavior of gays and lesbians which lead to problems with APA.
    - She also lead a attack on the result of research findings addressing topics which violated her conservative views.
  - She has been identified as hypocritical for advising certain behaviors which she did not follow herself.
- Their difficulties makes them poor role models of scientific psychologists disseminators of scientific knowledge about psychology.

### IV. MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

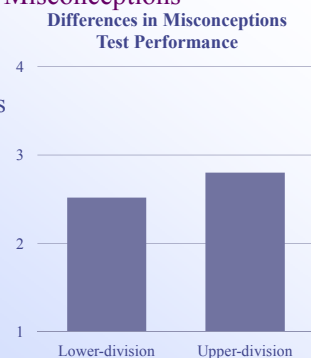
#### A. Introduction

- Dissemination is not the only problem in raising public knowledge about psychology.
  - Myths and misconceptions about Psychology abound and need to be changed!
    - The standards defining mental disorders have changed over the years. T
    - Your eyes, ears, and other sensory organs provide an accurate experience of the world as it truly exists. F
    - People feel better when they express their anger than when they try to control it. F
    - People's recall of early childhood experiences tends to be clear and accurate. F
    - Even a skilled hypnotist cannot force hypnotized people to things against their will. F

### IV. MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

#### B. Research on Misconceptions

- Upper and lower division WSU psychology students were given the misconceptions questionnaire.
- Responses coded from (1) certainly wrong about misconceptions to (4) certainly correct.



### IV. MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

#### B. Research on Misconceptions

- Although misconception score increased, there remains a good deal of uncertainty about the truth of scientific facts about the mind and behavior.
  - Among lower division students, there was more confusion about misconceptions, with their average score reflecting uncertainty ( $M = 2.52$ ).
  - Among upper division students, they were only a little certain of their correct evaluations of the misconceptions ( $M = 2.80$ ).
- Why is overcoming misconceptions a challenge?

## V. THE SELF HELP BOOKS

### A. Self Help Industry

- Self help books have a long tradition and is a burgeoning industry.
  - Self-help books date back to 19<sup>th</sup> Century England, and depending on your definition, to the Bible.
  - Self-help book industry worth over half a billion dollars a year
    - Plug "self-help" into Amazon, and you'll come up with almost 150,000 books.
    - Add seminars, web sites, and CDs, and that value could double or triple.
- Although it is a big business, is it based on scientific principles, e.g., psychological testing?

## V. THE SELF HELP BOOKS

### B. Self Help and Psychology

- In the 1970s there was a belief that psychology can be “given away” with self-help books.
  - Leading academic psychologists wrote, promoted, and evaluated self-help books.
  - But self administered therapy in a self-help book did not prove to be as effective as face-to-face therapy.
    - Evidence of the failure of sizable percentages of participants do no complete self-help compared to those in the face-to-face therapy.
  - The findings highlight the limitations of self-help books to effectively change behavior.

## V. THE SELF HELP BOOKS

### B. Self Help and Psychology

- By 1980s and 90s, there was more publication.
  - Data remained sparse, with the ratio between books to studies lowering from .86 (1970s) to .59 (1980, and 90s), meaning that there were more self-help books than studies
  - However one type of self help book was challenged by a focused set of research – subliminal therapy, where information was presented unconsciously
    - Packaging and therapist tapes were switched, but people believed that they change in a manner consistent with the packaging.
    - Nonetheless subliminal therapy continues to be sold.

## V. THE SELF HELP BOOKS

### B. Self Help and Psychology

- Rosen et al (2003) summarized the findings
  - They suggest that self-help books are less effective (and sometimes ineffective) when used alone than when used in conjunction with a therapeutic intervention.
  - The correct controls are necessary for this work:
    - Book used alone vs. no book
    - Book used in therapy vs. book used alone vs. no book
  - Effective techniques in therapy may not translate into effective techniques in self help books.
- They conclude that the optimism about self-help has given way to some pessimism.



## V. THE SELF HELP BOOKS

### C. The Assignment

- Rosen et al (2003) offer some suggestions for evaluation.
  - Reach: Breadth of applicability
  - Efficacy: Does it work and under what conditions
  - Adoption: How has used the program?
  - Implementation: Ease of use?
  - Maintenance: Produce lasting results?
- Other dimensions of evaluation?
  - EBP?
  - SR?