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Is Evidence-Based Practice Diverse Enough?

Philosophy of Science Considerations

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In its policy rationale for evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP), the APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice (April/May 2006) claims to have constituted itself with “scientists and practitioners from a wide range of perspectives and traditions, reflecting the diverse perspectives within the field” (p. 273). We applaud this attention to diversity but contend that an entire perspective of the debate is omitted in the Task Force’s newly approved policy and its underlying report. This perspective is a broad philosophy of science consideration for evidence-based practice that is held, in varying degrees, by many members of several APA Divisions, including 24 (Theory and Philosophy) and 32 (Humanism).

The failure to consider a philosophy of science perspective leads the Task Force to make a number of epistemological assumptions that are not based on evidence or rationale, and thus violate the very spirit of evidence-based decision-making. In this comment, we reveal a few of these assumptions and discuss their detrimental consequences.

The Task Force’s grand assumption, underlying all the claims of its report, is that “evidence” equals “empirical.” The report claims, for example, that “the purpose of EBPP is to promote effective psychological practice . . . by applying empirically supported principles of psychological assessment, case formulation, therapeutic relationship, and intervention” (APA, p. 273). Here, as in several other places, the Task Force asserts *that* it endorses the application of empirically supported principles, but fails to explain *why*.

There is, we suspect, an important reason for this lack of explanation: the Task Force assumes an empiricist framework requires no justification. The usual reasoning behind this assumption is a prevalent, yet mistaken, notion that “we can only know, or know best, those

aspects of our experience that are sensory” (Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005, p. 84). This mistake is consistent with much of psychology’s recent history (Viney & King, 1998), in which empiricism has been misunderstood to mean objective or impartial, “in the sense of exposing what is actual or real” (Slife et al., p. 84). In other words, empiricism is not viewed as a *particular* epistemology or philosophy at all, but as a transparent window to the way things are.

Ironically, this assumption of transparency violates the very spirit of the evidence-based practice movement: if the framework of a therapeutic method requires justification, then why not the framework of an investigative method upon which the APA policy is based? The latter framework cannot be justified empirically because empiricism is the issue in dispute. However, an empiricist framework can be examined and potentially justified through a reasoned assessment of its assumptions and implications (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005).

Unfortunately, this type of examination is altogether missing from the Task Force’s report and policy statement.

Without such an examination, deeply problematic aspects of the Task Force’s framework are neglected. For example, the Task Force does not adequately consider that researchers and clinicians are invested in nonobservable (non-sensory) meanings and relationships (Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005, p. 89). This investment is evident, for example, in the efforts of Division 29 (Psychotherapy) to identify and validate empirically supported therapy relationships, such as therapeutic alliance and group cohesion (APA, p. 272). Although this alliance and coherence are surely experienced by patients and therapists, they do not fall on their retinas (Slife et al., p. 91). The *people* of these relationships are observed and registered, in some sense, on their retinas, but the “*betweenness*” of these people is not experienced through sensory observation (pp. 88-89).

Both Division 29 and the Task Force assert the existence and importance of these relations (APA, pp. 272, 275), but in order to comply with the method requirements of empiricism, they must operationalize or make these relations observable (p. 274). The problem is that any specified operationalization (e.g., questionnaire ratings) can occur without the nonobservable experience (e.g., therapeutic alliance), and any such experience can occur without the specified operationalization. The upshot is that the construct operationalized may never be studied. Moreover, one can never empirically know the relation between the construct and its operationalization because pivotal aspects of this relation – the construct and relation itself – are never observable (Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, pp. 89-92). By ignoring this crucial problem, APA's policy runs the risk of making psychotherapy research a compendium of operationalizations without any knowledge of how they relate to the original object of study.

Problems such as these are the reason that alternative philosophies of science, such as qualitative methods, were formulated. Indeed, many qualitative methods were specifically formulated to investigate experienced, but not strictly observed, relational meanings of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). But this implies another problem with the unexamined framework of the Task Force's report – it tends to assume that all alternative methods are variations on the same empiricist epistemology. For example, the Task Force includes qualitative research on its list of acceptable methods (APA, p. 274), but it fails to understand and value qualitative research as a different philosophy of science.

A clear signal that the Task Force misunderstands and misrepresents qualitative research is its use of the word “subjective” in describing the purpose of qualitative research only. In the midst of a discipline that champions “objective” inquiry, relegating qualitative methods to the “subjective” is a second-class citizenship, at best. More importantly, this relegation makes sense

only from an empiricist framework. In many non-empiricist philosophies of science, dualistic conceptions of “objective” and “subjective” are largely irrelevant (Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999).

We applaud the Task Force for including qualitative research, but in order to do so, it needs to recognize its different epistemological underpinnings. Likewise, if the Task Force is going to subordinate or marginalize alternative methods and practices, then it needs to recognize that this is a *philosophical* decision, and as such, requires a philosophical rationale.

Unfortunately, the Task Force’s policy statement and report provide no such rationale because they do not consider such alternatives. As a consequence, they fail at one of their primary purposes: “reflecting the diverse perspectives within the field” (APA, p. 273).

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