

## Bicultural Issues

The Bicultural Issues column is prepared by the National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues. It aims to inform readers about bicultural issues and explain their implications for the activities of psychologists, and for the practices and policies of the society.

# THE PRACTICE OF RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY

Prepared by Raymond Nairn in consultation with members of NSCBI

Since the first appearance of these columns (*Bulletin No. 82*) we have discussed a number of the issues that have arisen as psychology and psychologists respond to biculturalism. Over the last year NSCBI has put considerable energy into preparing three chapters for *Professional Practice Issues and Guidelines for New Zealand Clinical and other Applied Psychologists: A Handbook*. In writing those chapters we have recognised the need to be more specific about conflicts and incompatibilities between current psychological practices and kaupapa Maori understandings and procedures. This need to be more specific has pushed us to look more critically at the research that underpins the normative practices of our discipline.

This column is the first of several addressed to research practices. In it we are identifying and commenting on some of the key values that shape the bulk of psychological research. For simplicity we have confined ourselves to four; the priority given to universal laws of human behaviour, the realist epistemology and understanding of objectivity, the veneration of quantification and statistical analysis, and the practice of interpreting differences as deficits. For clarity we have chosen to exemplify these values by reference to an article on "attachment styles" (Siegert, Ward & Hudson, 1995) in human relation-

ships. This article was chosen because it was a readily available example of the research practices we are discussing.

### Universal laws of human behaviour

The psychology that emerged in late 19th century Europe and was cultured in the hothouse of American (US) universities has always given priority to discovering (the) laws explaining human behaviour. Such laws are expected to be able to explain or, preferably predict, how a person, any person, would behave in a specified task or situation. This expectation shapes psychological language. Researchers reify the entities they are investigating associating them with human beings abstracted from their time, culture and society. Siegert et al (op cit) talk consistently of "attachment styles" and "adult romantic relationships" as if these were entities that existed wherever people live together rather than discursive constructions existing primarily within the talk of the psychologists.

Irrespective of whether the goal of universal laws reflects a "physics envy" or the physiological roots of experimental psychology, it places individualised biological beings at the forefront of the enterprise. For it is only as individualised biological beings that people are sufficiently comparable to make the search for

universal regularities in behaviour fruitful. Such prioritising of the biological can be seen particularly clearly in research on perception, conditioning, motivation, emotions and memory. Despite changes in fashion, research paradigms have sought to minimise the impact of each subject's real life on the experimental situation and measures. Prilleltensky (1994) calls this the study of "an asocial and ahistorical being whose life vicissitudes are artificially disconnected from the wider sociopolitical context." (p34)

A most important consequence of disconnecting subjects from their life context to study their behaviour is that researchers then cannot recognise or acknowledge the pressures and effects of human development and life when making sense of their data. For example Siegert et al appear to consider only two possibilities in accounting for attachment style; "... a personality trait or a product of a unique person-situation interaction". Effects created by economic relationships, by supportive or disabling communities, by cultural priorities, by linguistic practices, by institutional discrimination, or by any other aspects of real life disappear. They become 'error variance' to be controlled or minimised rendering social, cultural and political effects invisible and researchers are constrained to in-

positioning them within the life context of the acting subjects but, predominantly, in terms of deficits. To accomplish this the research community has identified a person or group against whose performance others may be judged deficient. Such normative choices are rarely identified and are therefore invisible (Tavris, 1993 provides an exception to this observation). Further, the choice of a norm is essentially subjective. The differences may be an aspect of the world external to the observer but the identification of one pole of the difference as normative is an act of interpretation.

In commenting on these four values we have identified ways in which they structure a mutually self-sustaining practice. We have not commented explicitly on the way that these values discourage psychology from exploring the role of meanings in people's behaviour. Despite the fact that each of us in our everyday life routinely responds to people, situations and events in terms of what they mean to us and that we are active participants in identifying and generating those meanings our discipline does not study or explore this central aspect of our lives. When we act as researchers we routinely deny our subjects the opportunity to behave in these very human ways. It seems ironic that the psychology's pursuit of an understanding of human behaviour has denied its own humanity. The values we have spoken of have produced a science that does not and maybe cannot tackle the central issue - the interplay between meanings and behaviour. Given that any meaning is established relative to the socio-cultural life context of the person or persons affected a psychology that takes meaning seriously must be a cultural psychology and would, for this reason, be more open in responding to the need to become bicultural.

In subsequent columns we will present examples of recently completed psychological research that has employed different approaches to research in New Zealand. These columns are intended to assist us to develop practices that enable us to engage more effectively with human behaviour. They will also explore how these developments in research practice relate to the development of bicultural practice here.

## References

- Bartholomew, K. (1994) Assessment of individual differences in adult attachment. *Psychological Inquiry*, 5, 23-27.
- Billig, M. (1985) Prejudice, categorization and particularization: from a perceptual to a rhetorical approach. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15, 79-103.
- Gilbert, G.N., & Mulkay, M. (1984) *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*, (Cambridge and New York): Cambridge University Press.
- Potter, J., Wetherell, M., & Chitty, A. (1991) Quantification rhetoric - cancer on television. *Discourse & Society*, 2, 333-365.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1994) *The Morals and Politics of Psychology*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Siebert, R.J., Ward, T., & Hudson, S. (1995) The structure of romance: A factor-analytic examination of the relationships scale questionnaire. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 24, 13-20.
- Tavris, C. (1993) The mismeasure of women. *Feminism & Psychology*, 3, 149-168.

# FOCUSING THE MIND

an international conference on innovative and effective interventions in counselling and psychotherapy

Wellington, New Zealand  
26 - 29 November, 1997

## Keynote presentations and workshops by

- Prof Patricia Resick (Professor of Psychology, Director, Centre of Trauma Recovery, University of Missouri-St. Louis) on *Effective interventions for post-traumatic stress disorders*
- Dr Mervin Smucker (University of Milwaukee) on *Imagery rescripting: an innovative treatment of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse*
- Dr Mary Anne Layden (Department of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania) on *Personality disorders: are effective interventions available?*
- Dr Kevin Stark (University of Texas, Austin) on *Empirically based interventions for depression in childhood and adolescence*
- Dr Kevin Ronan (Massey University, New Zealand) on *Working with anxious and comorbid disorders of childhood and adolescence*
- Prof Keith Dobson (Professor and Director, University of Calgary, Canada) on *Cognitive therapy: conceptual and empirical boundaries*
- Drs Henck van Bilsen (Senior Research Fellow, Central Institute of Technology; Director, Auckland Institute for Cognitive and Behaviour Therapies, New Zealand) on *Treatment development and research challenges for the next decade*
- Dr A Mauda Baker (Newcastle, Australia) on *Counselling and Psychotherapy for Addiction*

OTHER THEMES INCLUDE: SCHIZOPHRENIA, DEPRESSION & ANXIETY.

We invite submissions and proposals for workshops, individual papers and symposia:

- individual papers (20 minutes)
- symposia (90 minutes/4 papers)
- mini workshops (90 minutes)

for this exciting and challenging conference



CENTRAL INSTITUTE  
OF TECHNOLOGY

*Te Whare Wananga O Whirinaki*

For further information:

Phone (04) 527 6397 Ext 6761

Fax: 527 6380 e.mail margaret.gurney@cit.ac.nz