

Why Psychology Must Change

By David Blakeslee, Psy.D.

Since its inception, mainstream psychology has largely attempted to present itself as a value-free science of human behavior. As a profession, it has often viewed religion as being both value-laden and inherently an illusion. It appears that the profession quickly chose to emphasize its role as an objective science while encouraging the general public to devalue its reliance on other forms of authority. Some might argue that this was a backlash against a powerful set of institutions which had, at times interfered with scientific inquiry. Perhaps the most widely known example of this is the Catholic Church's "condemning of Galileo as a heretic (Carrol and Shifflett, 2002)," and, in the 20th century, William Jennings Bryan's attempts to suppress the teaching of evolution (Larson, 1997). A stronger argument can be made, however, that Judeo-Christian values were far more beneficial to science than restrictive. They introduced a linear view of history, they challenged the notion of fate and determinism, they preserved Classical thought during the Dark Ages and during the Age of Enlightenment created and organized hundreds of colleges and universities that ignited scientific inquiry.

Nonetheless, a growing body of philosophers and theorists perceived faith, and therefore religion, as a threat to the search for knowledge. If they were correct, they were obliged to diminish the power of the church while increasing psychology's value to the general population. Freud came to the forefront of this effort when he challenged the

role of religion saying, "Religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushing superior force of nature." In one powerful tome, Freud postulated that faith in God and religion and following its precepts was a form of **existential neurosis** (Freud, 1961).

As a "founding father" of our profession, **Freud's impact** appears to have been significant. For example, **psychologists**, when compared with all academicians, **are the least religious**. Only 33% of psychologists **describe religious faith** as the most important influence in their lives, **as compared to 72%** of the general population. **Fifty percent of psychologists** indicate that they have no religious preference as compared with only 10% of the general population (Jones, 1994). These discrepancies may have led to two significant problems for our profession: a deep lack of attunement with our clients in perhaps the most central way they understand themselves and the world, and a search for truth that automatically excludes religion as a meaningful source of information.

The Notion Of A Values-Free Psychology Has Been Illusory

In the short run, this perspective has **given psychology the impression of being free of bias in its efforts to understand**

and improve human behavior and experience. This notion has been further promulgated by the experimental model with its fundamental premise that, for the search for truth to be valid, we must first be willing to abandon our preconceived attitudes, instruction, expectations and beliefs. Psychologists have held that, unfettered by prejudiced human myths and superstitions, they are free to explore human behavior more objectively, and thereby be better able to help people. The notion of a value-free, objective psychology has itself been largely an illusion, resulting in many unintended consequences in both psychological practice and social policy. At a more fundamental level, these perspectives have led to what I would call a forced naïveté that wrongly risks reducing religion to a historic relic and elevating psychology to assume the mantle of authority in most matters of human existence.

I say naïveté because, in the last decade, an abundance of troubling statistics have emerged which call into question the presumed benefits of a value-free or neutral psychology for the consumers of psychology at both individual and societal levels. This alleged value-free psychology has undermined the role of established religious faith in the lives of Americans. Consequently, the institutions of marriage and family have also been greatly weakened, exposing women and children to increased risks of poverty and abuse. I am sure that our intentions were good, but the outcome of those intentions do not bode well for our children, our families, ourselves, and the society at large.

For example, psychology has a long history of authors who have devalued the importance of marriage as a significant general factor in improving the human condition. In 1972, pop psychology books suggested, "If it comes down to marriage and identity, your identity is more important (O'Neill and O'Neill, 1972; see also Bernard, 1983; Gittleman and Markowitz, 1974). In many books of this era, which clearly reflect the prevailing values, marriage is often seen as an archaic institution that empowers men, exploits women and abuses children. Psychology as a profession appeared to indulge rather than critically evaluate such assertions. As late as 1996, texts on sociology and psychology discuss spousal abuse, but not co-habitation abuse. This omission leads the neophyte student to conclude that domestic violence is correlated with the "oppressive nature of marriage," rather than plain old misogyny. Furthermore, they lead to an ill-informed educated class that recommend poorly and naively. The statistics below document some of the psychological costs of these "value-free" recommendations:

- From 1950 to 1995 the marriage rate decreased from 11.1 to 7.6 per thousand. From 1940 to 1990 the divorce rate doubled from 2.0 to 4.7 per thousand (CDC, 1995).
- Boys raised in single parent families are twice as likely to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration

by the time they reach their thirties when compared with boys raised by both their parents (Wait and Gallagher, 2000).

- Between 1965 and 1992 there was an explosion in the rate of violent crimes by youth. Though the murder rate has decreased in recent years, this may be an artifact of longer prison terms and improved emergency room procedures. Arrests for aggravated assaults remain at all time highs (Satcher, 2001).
- Divorce in one generation leads to an increase in illegitimacy in the next. Young women whose parents divorced, for example, were more than three times as likely to have an out-of-wedlock child (5% vs. 17%). Illegitimacy poses risks of poverty, and increased risks of sexual and physical abuse for the child (Waite and Gallagher, 2000).
- Children raised in single parent homes are twice as likely to drop out of high school and these numbers do not improve when a second adult is providing income to the family (McLanahan, 1995).
- No one questions that there has been an increase in reports of child abuse and sexual abuse of children over the past three decades. Clearly, this is partly due to a campaign to increase awareness and therefore reporting of child abuse. What is rarely, if ever emphasized in such reports is that step-fathers, mothers' boyfriends and foster fathers are seven times more likely to sexually abuse female children they supervise when compared to biological fathers (Wyatt, 1985).
- Women in cohabiting relationships are much more likely to be severely physically abused than those in either dating or marital relationships (Stets and Strauss, 1989). It is not marriage that is the "hitting license," but co-habitation.
- The suicide rate for white males age 15-24 has tripled since 1950. For African American males aged 15-19 it has increased an alarming 105% from 1980 to 1996 (CDC, 1999). Women and men in marriages are likely to suffer lower levels of mental illness than their single or divorced counterparts and, contrary to Bernard's (1983) research, wives do not suffer greater levels of mental illness when compared with their husbands (Popenoe, 2002).

Creating A Nightmare Of Self-Destructive Children

Freud accused religion of sacrificing "reality to the projected dream (Freud, 1961)." It appears, however, that during the era of professional psychology, our society has created a nightmare of more asocial, antisocial and self-destructive children. In addition, in its efforts to liberate women, we have exposed them and their children to a nightmare of more

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abuse and poverty. If this rejection of religion as a guide to moral life is a better reality, I struggle to see it. If any other profession, during its ascension, had observed such a decline in the quality of life of its proposed beneficiaries, critics would rightly challenge the value of that profession.

At best, psychology has maintained a stance of neutrality, and demonstrated its impotence in improving the human condition in the face of prevailing social demands. At worst, psychology has significantly contributed to the endangerment of children and women through the propagation of a "value-free" myth that dismantles the overwhelming benefits of marriage and family. Both views are terrible but plausible verdicts as to the usefulness of our profession. In either case, it is time for us as a profession to seriously reconsider the consequences of our own value system and our suspicion of established religious and moral beliefs as an important means of bettering the human condition.

Stanton Jones wrote, "Even if we think about our religious beliefs as biases that we bring to psychological science and practice, we must come to realize first that such biases are intrinsic to our professional activities in that it is our biases that allow us to perceive and understand anything at all, and second, that the most limiting and dangerous biases are those that are unexamined and hence exert their effect in an unreflective manner" (Jones, 1994). It is time for psychologists to examine our "neutral, objective and value-free" bias. It is especially important to do so because our less sophisticated audiences, the general media, our clients and our students, think that when we say we are "value-free," that we are actually value-free and therefore our words can be trusted implicitly. Very often we are asked important questions by those who count on us, and our "value-free" bias colors our recommendations to parents, adolescents, students, politicians, minorities and the poor.

Americans Cannot Afford A Value-Free Psychology

So, why then must psychology change? Because most Americans, and the world, cannot afford a value-free psychology. At the very least, the active ignoring or rejection of religious tenets is a grandiose assertion that religion provides little to no "intelligence" about the human condition. It also flies in the face of the actual data about the positive role that religious beliefs play in the lives of a huge majority of Americans. But even on a practical level, most Americans can only afford a short-term course of psychotherapy. Indeed, most of the world population is very unlikely to be able to afford any form of psychotherapy. The people who need the benefits of our science, the poor and vulnerable, are the least able to afford the treatment. Teaching at our universities and colleges must focus on values that work independent of costly psychological intervention. These "truths" can be shared widely through self-help groups, churches, schools and political groups. The world at large is interested, not in opening psychological clinics everywhere, but in understanding which large

parts of their culture and faith have been **adaptive** in advancing them as a people. In essence, **they would** benefit from understanding the "built-in" **adaptive**, healing psychology that has been present in their **culture and faith** for hundreds and maybe thousands of years.

So, as we consider the role of psychology in the next thirty years, we have to ask whether we will **merely be witness** to the destructive elements of our culture or **actually be able** to help improve the human condition. As **individual** psychologists we have to ask what role we will **play** with each of our clients in treatment beyond just **reducing** problematic symptoms. It is reasonable to assert that the data now suggest that we have an increased **responsibility** and a broader set of obligations as advisors to our clients and the general public.

Psychologists Must Rethink Values-Free Therapy

We have the obligation to explain that many **times immoral** acts lead to or exacerbate psychological **disturbance** and reductions in their quality of life. We have an **obligation** to ponder the ramifications of our neutrality **when a growing** body of evidence exists which should **encourage** us to inform married couples of the importance, **not only** for them, but for their children and our **society at large**, of working on their marriage, and that this **effort has rewards** beyond their own immediate happiness. We have an obligation to warn our adolescent clients of the **growing** body of evidence that suggests that their "experimentation" with drugs, premature ventures into sexual **behavior** and opposition to authority figures in general **threatens** to lower the quality of their lives (Mash and Barkley, 1996).

We have an obligation to criticize the **materialism** and hedonism of our popular culture, especially **when our** professional stance of being "value-free" and **non-judgmental** is exploited so that all values are treated as **equal** regardless of their long-term effect. We have an **obligation** to say that we know much less than we purport to **know**, that some our information turns out to be **horribly biased** and that the potential wisdom of religion in the lives of our clients and the general public can play a much **more powerful** role in changing their lives for the better, than can psychology.

- In the future, the credibility of psychology as a profession will rightly be assessed by the general improvements in our society. The health of marriages and the family are inextricably tied together: researchers correctly note, "Each divorce is the death of a small civilization" (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1990). Lowering poverty, crime, violence against women, physical and sexual abuse of children are all related to **how** we value the family. Over the next thirty years, **psychology** should deeply invest in marriage and **the family**, through research and advocacy. Here are **some ways** we can shape things through the APA:

We should present and organize a Public Interest Initiative on the benefits of marriage, similar to the ACT project on violence, made available to churches, schools, self-help groups and others. Part of that project should urge couples to seek marital therapy early in conflict, while motivation for reconciliation is still high. In addition to public interest information, it should have three other focuses:

The APA should advocate for a premarital counseling curriculum for prospective couples that includes education about anger management and domestic violence, communication training skills, financial planning, sex education and parenting skill training.

The APA should advocate for a family development program to help new and maturing parents better understand the needs of their partner throughout the life cycle as well as the quickly changing needs of their children.

The APA should officially encourage parents to participate in low conflict divorces, maintain high attunement to their children in the year or two after the divorce and avoid romantic entanglements, which easily marginalize their children's needs.

We should encourage psychologists to receive advanced training in marital and family therapy. Many psychologists leave graduate school as competent individual therapists, teachers and administrators/interpreters of psychological tests. Psychologists who make marital and family therapy an area of expertise should be asked to demonstrate their training in this form of treatment and maintain their expertise through continuing education, consultation and supervision.

The APA should advocate in Washington D.C. to require insurance companies to reimburse for marital therapy as a means of improving one's resistance to mental illness as well as lowering the probability of domestic violence during divorce and other periods of family stress.

Educators who have access to public schools that teach about the family and sexual behavior should make sure that the full benefits of marriage, faith, and family are discussed when compared to cohabitation, divorce and infidelity.

Psychology Can Have A Profoundly Positive Effect

The next thirty years guarantees the expansion of psychology in every American's life and to the larger world outside the Western Hemisphere. As a profession, we have an opportunity to reevaluate what we are suggesting and whether those who trust us will either suffer or benefit from our thoughtful suggestions. Prior to Freud, the health of the individual, the family and our society was often placed in the hands of religious institutions. Those institutions, however flawed, guided man in establishing

the rule of law, dismantling polygamy, elevating children's status from property to people, establishing democracy, abolishing slavery, and encouraging scientific inquiry. Psychology will have a profoundly positive effect on the future as it understands and respects how religion plays that profound role in our society.

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