

BOOK REVIEW

Therapy Today and Its Abandonment of the Marginalized. A Review of *How Psychologists Failed: We Neglected the Poor and Minorities, Favored the Rich and Privileged, and Got Science Wrong*

Fathali M. Moghaddam

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Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

The hegemonic discipline of modern Western psychology maintains a global influence and is exported for mass consumption throughout the world. Despite this unchecked dominance, it continues to neglect disadvantaged minorities and adopts a truncated model of science, which does not support non-Western peoples and perspectives. What has gone wrong and how to reclaim a true “science of the soul” for all humanity are some of the most pressing questions of our time. These problems represent what may be called examples of tacit structural conflict related in part to inequalities.

Mainstream psychology gives inadequate attention to the broader human collectivity and how this influences individual people. The discipline has largely neglected the relationship between poverty and human behavior—how it influences, for example, sensations, perceptions, and motivations. Societies that prioritize self-help and individual responsibility interpret wealth and success as by-products of individual talents; they do not acknowledge the implicit disadvantages of the poor even if they possess such talents or skills.

Throughout the history of modern Western psychology, intelligence has been a controversial and challenging area of research. The concept of personality has also been a significant topic of debate. The modern discipline reduces personality to an almost purely “horizontal” level and does not take into account the “vertical” or spiritual dimension of human identity, which is universal and transpersonal. Mainstream therapies often view consciousness and free will as illusions and attempt to identify their hidden mechanisms in order to obtain causal explanations. Reductionistic interpretations run through modern theories of motivation and resilience. As these are

clearly influenced by ideological bias, Moghaddam affirms that “mainstream psychology is ideology” (p. 77).

Invisibility is a striking feature of poverty. Today, lower class people tend to be unseen. This perpetuates the lack of attention to their needs and interests, only to exacerbate class-based prejudices. While multicultural psychology devotes special attention to ethnic minorities, it has not been able to improve the deeply embedded social inequalities needed to bring people out of poverty. Moghaddam writes, “Celebrating ethnic group differences without addressing the problem of the poverty suffered by most ethnic minority members is not an effective solution to their deep material problems” (p. 88).

The connection between poverty and the mass incarceration of the poor is also an important facet of the broader discussion regarding social class and cultural diversity. Moghaddam states: “Financial motives also directly and indirectly influence the growth and shaping of modern prisons” (p. 127). It is not that the rich are more ethical but that their wealth and privilege protect them from the possibility of incarceration.

The mass exportation of modern Western psychology to non-Western cultures is an example of its hegemonic and totalitarian disposition. Moghaddam makes an interesting observation: “The exported psychological science has addressed the needs of only the upper class in low-income societies” (p. 142). This suggests that modern therapies, while available throughout the world, are in large part available only to privileged classes and not the poor. A question not raised in the book is that, if mainstream psychology is methodologically flawed in its very foundations, and even if poor people could afford mental health treatments, it is questionable whether they would benefit from them. If we only talk about greater access to mental health treatment, and do not tackle the more difficult question regarding the truncated paradigm of the discipline, we will fail to fully understand the predicament at hand.

This book urges us to look beyond causal reductionism, yet it does not mention the loss of a sense of the sacred in the world today. What is overlooked is the need to restore a spiritual dimension to psychology, which is key to rehabilitating a true “science of the soul.” Although Moghaddam calls for the full support of disadvantaged minorities, nowhere (in the book) is it recognized that these same people are often anchored in spiritual traditions and wish to receive mental health services that take into account their sacred worldview.

The author makes an important point about why it is difficult to make any real changes within the discipline: “Mainstream

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Samuel Bendeck Sotillos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7356-6775>

SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS is a practicing psychotherapist who has worked for many years in the field of mental health and social services. His focus is on comparative religion and the intersection between culture, spirituality, and psychology. His works include *Paths That Lead to the Same Summit: An Annotated Guide to World Spirituality* (2020), *Dismantling Freud: Fake Therapy and the Psychoanalytic Worldview* (2020), and *Behaviorism: The Quandary of a Psychology Without a Soul* (2017).

CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THIS ARTICLE should be addressed to Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, Institute of Traditional Psychology, 3023 W. Belmont Avenue, Chicago, IL 60618, United States. Email: samuelbendeck@yahoo.com

psychological methods are positioned as ‘scientific,’ and anyone who opposes them becomes ‘anti-science’” (p. 145). This defensiveness within the discipline is likely due to the fact that since its inception, modern psychology has attempted to assert itself as an authentic science, yet, in the eyes of many, it has still not achieved this status. We need to be vigilant so as to not confuse science with *scientism*, which is the assumption that the scientific method is the only valid means of comprehending reality as a whole.

The notion that modern science—and its concomitant psychology—are for all peoples, regardless of social and cultural differences, is deeply flawed. Moghaddam emphasizes that “reductionism has proven to be an invalid approach to studying and understanding human behavior” (p. 174), yet without grounding psychology in a higher order of reality—based on traditional metaphysics—this type of pernicious reductionism is unavoidable.

Moghaddam’s work comes at a pivotal time when the disparities between the wealthy and the indigent are widening as never before.

He seeks to point out the plight of the most vulnerable by exposing many of the errors embedded in modern Western psychology and its ideological assumptions. This is a courageous book, which many mental health professionals would do well to consult. It is regrettable that the spiritual dimension of psychology is not (explicitly) mentioned, as this speaks to the core of what it means to be human; namely, integrated beings comprising physical, emotional, and spiritual needs that require a corresponding form of therapy that can do justice to their rich and complex reality *as a whole*. Creating just socioeconomic conditions is fundamental to the quest for healthier minds and more fulfilled people, but a solution that is all too often neglected is a return to the wisdom traditions of humanity.

Fathali M. Moghaddam, a widely published Iranian-born author, is professor of psychology at Georgetown University. He is a former editor of *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*.

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