

GIAN VITTORIO CAPRARA

Sapienza University of Rome

Department of Psychology

## PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE SHOULD NOT BE DISJOINED FROM THEORY OR LAG BEHIND GOOD RESEARCH

There is substantial agreement on the relevance of the questions raised by Jerzy M. Brzeziński and on the proposed answers. The common use of English in international scientific communication should not lead to neglecting the proper media of diffusing psychological knowledge in local languages. The current concern for assessing the quality of psychological research and research institutions should be accompanied by an equal concern for proper criteria to assess the quality of psychological practice and of practitioner education. The criteria of evaluating both research and practice should be grounded on solid psychological theories.

**Keywords:** diffusion of knowledge, assessment of research and practice.

In principle, I agree with Brzeziński's statement that the development of research and education is a task of the utmost importance to the development of a democratic society, and I would add that the contribution of psychological and social sciences to this aim is no less important than that of traditional hard sciences. I also agree with the answers given to the questions that have been addressed. The same reasoning about the global character of research and the criteria to assess its quality applies to Italy. Experiments should be replicable; observational, clinical, and correlational studies should be corroborated by cross-cultural findings, and raw data should be available whenever possible. Yet, replication cannot be only a matter of translation or repetition of the same procedures.

One cannot underestimate the fragility and volatility of previously observed regularities concerning cognition, affect, and behavior when brought to test in a different cultural context. Indeed, the major awareness of the flexibility, variability, and potentiality of human psychological functioning that derives from a better appreciation of culture and epigenesis should invite broader openness to novelty and diversity and warn against premature conclusions about what should be viewed as universally valid or true.

If English has to be used as a *lingua franca* among the scientific community, young researchers should be encouraged to master this language in order to contribute to the global debate. However, scientist should not be penalized for not having mastered idiomatic English and the competitive advantages of native English users should be minimized by editors, reviewers, and grant evaluators. Certainly, the need to gain visibility in the global arena should not lead to underestimating the need for and merit of proper diffusion of knowledge among practitioners, clients, and the general public.

The sustainability of journals mostly devoted to psychology has been a problem in Italy. In the case of scientific journals, the selective and limited readership and the appeal of international journals to the best scientists has made it difficult to preserve the scientific standards of national journals from the beginning. Recently, the decline in the attractiveness of Italian journals, even those published in English, has been further aggravated by the various bibliometric indices due to the advantage of well established international competitors. The production cost and the limited revenues derived from private and public subscriptions have further discouraged publishers from launching English editions. In the case of journals aimed at reaching the general public, it has instead been hard to make science interesting, attractive, and relevant enough to compete with the common-sense psychology of general-audience magazines. It is difficult to name an Italian journal that has been successfully able to reach a prestigious reputation and a broad readership in the fields of clinical, educational, and organizational psychology, despite the high number of practitioners. I cannot specify the extent to which the criteria that recommend a greater mastery of English among scientist should be accompanied by a broader use of English in the transfer of knowledge at universities. Certainly, students should be enabled to have direct access to most of the sources of their knowledge.

Good books can be written in any language and made available to broad audiences through good translations. Yet, it is intuitive that writing a book in a language that has a broader market can be much more profitable. Although good handbooks often include authors from different countries, this should not

discourage either collections of papers that convey the best of national psychologies or handbooks in which prestigious national scholars review and convey the state of the art of various disciplines of psychology. However, I doubt that the same handbooks and texts that serve students to acquire knowledge may equally serve practitioners and introduce students to practice. Practitioners should be helped and mentored to update their knowledge, to communicate efficaciously with their colleagues and their clients in the language they habitually use, and to deal with specific problems whose solution largely depends on their experience and their capacity to contextualize knowledge. Students should be enabled to understand how scientific knowledge turns in good practices, to interact efficaciously with other specialists, and to meet people's specific needs in particular contexts and under particular rules that may significantly vary across countries and cultures. This may require quite different sensitivities and approaches than the ones one can be accustomed to when reading scientific journals and academic textbooks.

I have not much to say about the number and variety of evaluation systems adopted at the national and local levels to bring order and merit recognition in quarters where there used to be too much uncertainty in the past. Regarding the evaluation of scientists, I doubt that the current devaluation of monographs always makes sense. It is certainly not fair to downgrade all monographs while prizing papers coauthored by dozens of people whose individual contributions remain dubious. Regarding the evaluation of departments and teaching institutions, I doubt that scientific output should be the main criterion when the mission of institutions is to produce practitioners other than researchers. I do not underestimate the difficulty and novelty of assessing practitioners' output, but I believe that much can be done to improve the assessment of psychologists' performance and to raise the quality of psychological practice. Standards of quality are particularly needed to evaluate the offer of private institutions that generally elude the traditional standards required by public scientific institutions.

Also, I have not much to say other than to agree in blaming plagiarism and data fabrication. Data make sense within a theory, which justifies the investment of money and effort made in their collection, which explains their meaning and implications for knowledge, and whose logic and coherence may serve as protection against frauds, at least in part.

I would conclude by reminding that nothing can be more useful than good psychological theories in times in which pressure of various kinds discourages from thinking psychologically and in which new technologies may nurture the illusion that a better knowledge of the functioning of the brain may fully replace

the study of mind, subjectivity, and individuality. We all are aware that it is particularly difficult to judge the merit of ideas and theories about mental structures and processes that are inferred from verbal reports, observations, and experiences that leave a large latitude of freedom to intuition, interpretation, and speculations. Yet, psychology must not give up its specificity as a science of the mind and its mission to bridge nature and nurture in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the whole personality.