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Understanding 'relevance' in psychology

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A B S T R A C T

Since the 1970s, psychologists around the world have questioned the 'social relevance' of psychology in their societies. Curiously, the matter of 'social relevance' is under-theorized in the discipline, a state of affairs this paper attempts to correct. First, it describes how disagreements about psychology's cognitive interest – and subject matter – create an environment in which accusations of 'social irrelevance' can flourish. Second, it asserts that applied psychology's reliance on basic psychology for its scientific authority makes debates about 'social relevance' inevitable. And third, it claims that the discipline's longstanding antithesis to the social domain leaves it vulnerable to these debates – particularly in recent decades that have witnessed rapid social change. The paper reflects further on the rise of 'market relevance' in the global academy and its significance for psychology today.

1. Introduction

For several decades, psychologists the world over have questioned the 'social relevance' of the discipline, accusing it of failing to deliver on what the second president of the American Psychological Association, George Trumbull Ladd, had imagined – "that it is able and destined to contribute greatly to the welfare of mankind" (1894, p. 19). Amid the turbulence of the 1960s, American social psychologists set about advancing arguments concerning the historicity (Gergen, 1973) and triviality (Ring, 1967) of the field. As for their European counterparts, behaviorist reductionism (Harré & Secord, 1972) and a slavish methodolatry (Moscovici, 1972) were identified as the root causes of the disciplinary malaise. Meanwhile, in China, psychology had been banned for some years by decree of the Cultural Revolution – for espousing bourgeois gobbledygook (Petzold, 1987). For Indian social psychologists, the state of crisis involved a choice between "straight-jacketed methodology" and "real-life issues" (J. B. P. Sinha, 1997, p. 79), while, in Latin America, the construction of *psicología de la liberación* was under way because "psychology as a whole … has stayed on the sidelines of the great movements and away from the distresses of the peoples of Latin America" (Martín-Baró, 1996, p. 17). In the Islamic world, a consensus had emerged that Muslim psychologists – in their eagerness to locate themselves beneath the aegis of science – had parroted Western psychological theories and practices that were inapplicable in their countries (Badri, 1979). And as far as Africa was concerned, the continent's singular lack of involvement in the life of the discipline was such that, by the early 1990s, it was reckoned that "the average black African is likely to declare that he has never heard of the term 'Psychology' in his life, or if he has heard of it, he is most likely to swear that he does not understand what it means" (Eze, 1991, p. 28).

In fact, when one considers the axe-grinding of the 1920s that pitted Edwin Boring against Lewis Terman (O'Donnell, 1979), modern psychology's travails with the peddlers of 'relevance' reach back nearly a hundred years. In the wake of the Great War, many psychologists adopted the view that the appropriate development of the discipline was best served by an orientation towards the alleviation of social problems (Rosnow, 1981): "[m]obilization had invigorated the social ideals of service and efficiency and had stimulated the postwar demand for what was precipitately called psychotechnology" (O'Donnell, 1979, p.

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290). The Great Depression, too, served to deepen the sensitivity of scientists to social issues, a process that accelerated with the outbreak of the Second World War (Burr, 2003). The 1936 founding of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) was in part a reaction against the perceived 'irrelevance' of a psychological science that had failed to meet its human welfare mandate. Notwithstanding the dangers of origin-diving, it may be claimed with some justification that the history of 'relevance' corresponds to no less than a history of the discipline.

Curiously, psychologists have never theorized this matter of 'relevance'. Then again, its bewildering indexicality (Hessels, van Lente, & Smits, 2009) makes it difficult to assess the merits of a term that vacillates between over-inclusive catchall and empty signifier. Nonetheless, this paper will attempt to address the oversight. It takes the position that, despite the *word* not always being used by interlocutors, 'relevance' as a *concept* is invoked whenever an estimation is made regarding "the expected value [disciplinary activities] will have for society" (Hessels, van Lente, & Smits, 2009, p. 388). Accordingly, the paper offers several explanations for the resilience of 'relevance' discourse in psychology. It reflects on the discipline's uncertainty regarding its cognitive interest, its dependence on a 'pure' science for intellectual respectability, and its adjustment difficulties in contexts of social upheaval – the totality of which makes psychology susceptible to charges of 'irrelevance'. The paper explores, also, the changing meaning of 'relevance' in higher education and the implications for 'relevance' in the discipline today.

2. Psychology and its subject matter

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Jürgen Habermas (1972) describes three modes of scientific enquiry, each of which produces 'interested' knowledge. First, in the *empirical-analytic* (i.e. natural) sciences, hypotheses are tested via observation and measurement in order to generate nomological facts. Considered value-free, this type of predictive knowledge aids technical mastery of the environment. Second, in the *historical-hermeneutic* (i.e. social) sciences, the assumption is that human action – enabled by consciousness – is inherently meaningful to self and others. "Access to the facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation" (Habermas 1972, p. 309), which occurs through acts of interpretation. The investigator's situatedness is acknowledged in that "[t]he world of traditional meaning discloses itself to the interpreter only to the extent that his own world becomes clarified at the same time" (Habermas 1972, pp. 309–310). Knowledge obtained hermeneutically has a practical – rather than technical – cognitive interest in a "possible consensus among actors in the framework of a self-understanding derived from tradition" (Habermas 1972, p. 310). And third, in the sciences of *social action*, law-obeying knowledge is also sought, although an attempt is made to produce a reflective consciousness in "those whom the laws are about" (Habermas 1972). Here, the cognitive interest is emancipatory and seeks liberation from "ideologically frozen relations of dependence" (Habermas 1972).

Psychology has the unusual distinction of belonging to all three knowledge traditions. The discipline's persisting failure to demarcate its boundaries – its most enduring controversy has to do with the scope of its subject matter – has encouraged the proliferation of an astonishing array of fields and sub-fields. On the other hand, it has also bequeathed a legacy of turf wars exemplified by incessant calls for 'relevance'. For, despite 'the individual' being identified as the discipline's proper focus of attention, its meaning has been overextended to the point of promoting either a dilettantism of sorts or the fullest culmination of human disciplining yet. Sensation, perception, will, habits, consciousness, mind, brain, the unconscious, behavior, cognition, being, personality, attitudes, sociality, subjectivity, discourse and community have all been advanced as the discipline's proper starting point, with the lack of consensus fueling one 'revolution' after another: a behaviorist revolution ended introspectionism, a cognitive revolution ended the 'social irrelevance' of 'rat psychology' and a discursive revolution (Harré, 2001) was touted as the answer to cognitivist reductionism at the same time that a dialogical revolution was expected to remedy the shortcomings of this second cognitive revolution (Shotter, 2001). But underpinning these disagreements about questions and methods is a basic dispute about the discipline's legitimate cognitive interest. Committed variously to the interests of control, understanding and critique, psychology has never managed to resolve this fundamental debate – which Kuhn (1962) viewed as evidence of its 'pre-paradigmatic' status.

And yet, even if psychologists were to agree on a single subject matter and on how best to study it, appeals for 'social relevance' would still not subside. As historical constructions, psychological categories are not naturally occurring phenomena – they only appear that way because "the network of categories … has been adopted from the broader language community to which psychologists belong" (Danziger, 2010, p. 55). Standard historiography in the discipline merely formalizes this appearance by virtue of a tacit commitment to "a timeless human nature" (Danziger, 2010, p. 56), sanctioning thereby the use of natural scientific methods for its investigation. Psychological categories are 'human kinds', which, because they permeate social life, are value-laden and able to operate upon their human carriers, altering continually the 'things' to which they refer (Hacking, 1995). A constantly evolving subject matter would only lead to further disagreements about questions and methods – and a return to debates about 'relevance'.

3. Basic and applied psychology

Apart from this reflexive quality of human subjectivity, psychology is also structured in a manner that invites questions about 'relevance'. To be precise, there are two requirements that must be met in order to establish a discipline, namely, the formation of cooperative partnerships and the production of socially useful knowledge (Danziger, 1990). In order to build effective alliances, new knowledge producers must prove their credentials to established producers. Knowledge must be created in

forms that are deemed valuable and via techniques that are considered reputable – "even though such rituals [may] have more in common with magic than with science" (Danziger, 1990, p. 181). In addition, knowledge products must address the interests of influential social groupings, failing which important sources of sponsorship can be lost. Subject to changing exigencies, the founding of a discipline is a politicized endeavor: practitioners must "accommodate themselves to the specific opportunities offered by a particular historical context" (Danziger, 1990, p. 102).

In the early days of modern psychology, these mutually dependent but contradictory demands – the discipline-bound pursuit of scientific respectability on the one hand and the marketing of psychological products for public consumption on the other – regulated the activities of its practitioners. By exploiting "the mystique of the laboratory and the mystique of numbers" (Danziger, 1990, p. 185), 'pure' research conferred upon the products of 'applied' research a scientific authority analogous to a competitive edge, which validated the important role the basic science played in the creation of expert knowledge.[1] But these complementary disciplinary pursuits also aggravated tensions between pure and applied research. Psychological applications were of two kinds: grand applications that had implications for social policy and localized applications with circumscribed possibilities. What told them apart was the distance between the setting in which the research was conducted ('context of investigation') and the setting in which findings were to be applied ('context of application'). Grand applications were characterized by a sizeable gap between the two contexts that could only "be bridged by a host of unproven and often unspoken assumptions" (Danziger, 1990, p. 187); for localized applications, it was considerably narrower. The problem was that the rhetoric of universalist science demanded the magnification of the gap, whereas the discipline's predictive accuracy depended on its minimization. The net effect was to concretize a somewhat false opposition between pure and applied psychology – with the latter allegedly the stronger performer on the 'social relevance' index.

Danziger's account of the origins of modern psychology delivers several insights about the 'relevance' concept. First, it suggests that the history of 'social relevance' is central to the history of psychology itself. The abiding interest in a 'socially relevant' psychology is symptomatic of an over-simplified distinction between its pure and applied versions. Psychology could not have established itself without addressing the social management priorities of bureaucratic elites: by making itself 'socially relevant', it secured a vital source of patronage. But it needed a 'socially irrelevant', apparently asocial foil whose scientific disinterestedness would underwrite the authority of its knowledge claims. The discipline, that is, traverses a polarity of 'relevance' that cannot be dissolved: the accusation of 'social irrelevance' is the price it must pay for the preservation of its scientific eminence. Second, Danziger's work anticipates the remarkable internationalization of the 'social relevance' question: the fact that the development of modern psychology was determined by the requirements of a specific social order clarifies why its later introduction in societies that did not share those contingencies would be experienced as jarring, alienating and therefore 'socially irrelevant'.[2] Third, if one acknowledges the politics of discipline-formation, it becomes clear that any attempt to create a 'socially relevant' psychology implies a particular constellation of social alliances – and when, over time, those alliances shift, the meaning of 'relevance' must change correspondingly. That is, 'social relevance' as an abstract ideal means little, because it is the world of practice – where possibilities are inevitably circumscribed – that imbues it with meaning (Danziger, 1990). This suggests, in turn, that psychology's inability to settle on a cognitive interest is not problematic in itself: after all, it is surely 'interest' that determines the parameters of 'social relevance' and, since the latter is historically contingent, one can hardly expect 'interest' to be finalizable either. And fourth, Danziger's contributions shed light on the proper scope of 'relevance-making'. Varieties of psychological knowledge are prepared with discrete audiences in mind; to advance the cause of a 'socially relevant' psychology does not require one to reinvent the discipline but only to supplement its activities judiciously – and "[t]here is nothing strange about that. What is strange is the notion of a single body of abstract psychological knowledge that is valid in all contexts and for all purposes" (Danziger, 1987, p. 10).

4. Psychology and social change

It has long been observed that, when these 'contexts' change, psychological theory struggles to remain 'relevant'. Gustav Jahoda once noted that the issues psychology tended to overlook were "mainly accompaniments or consequences of rapid social change" (1973, p. 466). Its theories lacked 'social relevance', which generated "talk of a crisis" (Jahoda, 1973). Because research methods in the discipline were developed on the assumption that the individual – and not wider societal configurations – was its proper subject matter, psychology was hamstrung from the beginning when it came to theorizing change. Having modeled its methods on those of the natural sciences, psychology proved "somewhat late in accepting the challenge posed by problems emanating from the planned programmes of rapid socio-economic development and social change adopted by most of the developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America" (D. Sinha, 1984, p. 17). The result was a lasting difficulty persuading these nations of its 'social relevance'. Conversely, the production of 'socially relevant' – for example, Afrocentric – research could

[1] Critical histories of the discipline, however, observe that early 'applied' psychology tended to operate relatively autonomously while 'pure' psychology borrowed liberally from its practices – that is, the two-step model functioned more as a rhetorical device that buttressed the scientific integrity of the discipline (Danziger, 1990).

[2] For example, Western liberal democratic polities – in which displays of naked power had become unfeasible – required an alternative 'government of the soul' for which psychology's expert technologies proved well-suited (Rose, 1990); in countries with dissimilar social histories, however, the 'irrelevance' of an imported 'psy-complex' was almost unavoidable.

always be accused of amounting to little more than "a sophisticated blueprint for intellectual neo-colonialism by showing Western scholars a way to survive in Africa by serving the needs of the new ruling class" (van den Berghe, 1970, p. 334).

In developed countries, a similar problem arose: rates of social change had accelerated to the point where "the overall framework can no longer be taken for granted, and also because psychology is being challenged to cope with problems that are new or have become intolerable in the present climate of opinion" (Jahoda, 1973, p. 466). The methods that had proven successful in the study of the individual were devised in an era of socio-economic stability such that factors beyond the individual were not considered important. Faced now with the social turmoil that fueled both the political radicalism of the late sixties and early seventies as well as the postcolonial moment that was reverberating throughout the Third World, the field to which everyone turned for answers – social psychology – was not up to the task. Reckoned not social enough (Moscovici, 1972), its perceived failure to explain and intervene in the goings-on of the real world took on 'crisis' proportions while questions about 'social relevance' preponderated. During periods of social equilibrium, psychology had been able to survive with its metatheoretical inadequacies concealed. In times of discontent, this was no longer possible. Theoretically speaking, these debates about 'social relevance' involved an interrogation of the discipline's dominating interest of control – and a coinciding desire for a critical, emancipatory mode of enquiry.

5. 'Social relevance' and social unrest

It is worth examining the foregoing observation that concerns about 'social relevance' materialized during periods of social unrest. In the American instance, opposition to the Vietnam War and domestic racism had peaked; in Europe, radicalized students rallied around a host of political causes; in China, a new regime proceeded to repress anything it deemed 'bourgeois'; in Latin America, economic exploitation occasioned a populist revolt; while in India, Africa and the Muslim world, struggles with postcolonial realities endured.

Pleas for 'social relevance', that is, did not emerge from social vacuums. In the American case, reservations about experimentalism had existed for many years, yet it was only in the sixties that these anxieties precipitated "the age of relevance" (Rosnow, 1981, p. 78). In particular, a cocktail of Wundtian dualism, the Clever Hans phenomenon, the Hawthorne effect and the insights of Luther Bernard and Saul Rosenzweig in the thirties and Edgar Vinacke in the mid-fifties should have been enough to trigger a call for 'social relevance' (Rosnow, 1981). The reason it did not, had a great deal to do with the *zeitgeist*: it was only in the late sixties and early seventies that a tipping point was reached, brought on by an accumulation of political crises. Domestic wiretapping, the Watergate scandal and the American public's growing knowledge of the excesses of biomedical research resonated with underlying themes of invasion of privacy, distrust of authority and scientific accountability (Rosnow, 1981).

In the non-American appeals for 'social relevance', however, a second factor must be considered. Calls for 'social relevance' depended as much on a postcolonial 'ecological niche' – to use Ian Hacking's (1998) phrase – as they did on ill-conceived attempts to internationalize the discipline. Hiroshi Azuma's (1984) historical analysis of the development of Japanese psychology illustrates this latter point. He writes of an initial 'pioneer period' characterized by recognition of the discipline's potential that led to its basic introduction at textbook level. Then, in the 'introductory period', increased academic regard encouraged the intellectual elite to train overseas. In the ensuing 'translation and modeling period', student and researcher numbers multiplied while theories and research practice were modeled on those of the developed world; applications were as yet only successful in culture-free areas. An 'indigenization period' followed wherein culturally sensitive theories were developed and applied. An 'integration period' marked the final stage in the discipline's trajectory in which a synthesis of Western and Japanese theories and practices was effected.

Albeit with varying degrees of fitness, Azuma's model can be superimposed on almost all of the aforementioned iterations of the 'social relevance' debate. Concerns about 'social relevance', that is, presented during the end-stages of 'translation periods' around the world when national and regional aspirations seemed to have been short-changed by a foreign disciplinary logic. But it was not the translation periods *per se* that kick-started a series of 'indigenization periods' – the mere fact that psychological knowledge had been made to 'travel' beyond its political, cultural and intellectual center did not make it inevitable that it would appear 'socially irrelevant' and in need of indigenization. It was also the fiercely anticolonial sentiment of the day that led psychologists around the world to reject the importation of psychological knowledge.

6. 'Social relevance' and social psychology

In light of the discernible association between conditions of social unrest and calls for 'social relevance', it is unsurprising that the latter presented most frequently in *social* psychology. After World War Two, American preeminence in the field was to be expected: it was, after all, American money – tied to "a prescriptive model of what science should be" (Moscovici & Markova, 2006, p. xiii) – that rebuilt European institutions. At the end of the 1950s, a rudimentary alliance existed between American and European social psychologists that complemented the broader efforts of the International Social Science Council to coordinate social sciences internationally. By the early 1960s, however, the Americans encountered a problem: social psychology's links with sociology and cultural anthropology were fueling questions about its status as an independent area of study.

One solution was to promote the field internationally. In 1964, the Committee on Transnational Social Psychology was formed. With Leon Festinger playing a leading role, the Transnational Committee's founding premise was to generate a universally valid body of social psychological knowledge by encouraging colleagues around the world to

conduct investigations in their own countries. Favoring the exploration of real-world phenomena, the Transnational Committee risked alienating itself from an American mainstream that had distanced itself increasingly from applied work (Moscovici & Markova, 2006). On the other hand, its assumption that internationalization involved the *dissemination* – and not the *advancement* – of knowledge, threatened to alienate its international partners. To be sure, after several networking conferences and training seminars in Europe, Latin America and Africa, collaborative arrangements remained more 'vertical' than 'horizontal' (Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996; Jahoda, 1973, 1975). On balance, the social needs of developing nations took a backseat to the theoretical preoccupations of American researchers (Tajfel, 1966). Because of unidirectional economic and intellectual sponsorship, the policy of cooperative cross-cultural research proved useful neither for developing nations nor for the 'organic' development of social psychology in those countries (Tajfel, 1968).[3]

Consequently, by the 1970s appeals for 'social relevance' had taken root among psychologists in Western Europe (Israel & Tajfel, 1972), Latin America (Martín-Baró, 1996), Asia (D. Sinha, 1973) and Africa (Abdi, 1975). Driven by political crises and a push for internationalization that resembled "intellectual imperialism" (Moscovici & Markova, 2006, p. 186), a situation arose in which a debate begun by American psychologists had taken on intercontinental proportions (Moghaddam, 1987). What was more, the internationalization of the 'social relevance' question represented not only an interrogation of disciplinary authority but a broader questioning of political authority. In social psychology as in politics, American and European models were seen increasingly as ineffectual in other parts of the world.

7. 'Market relevance' and the global academy

The constitutional mélange of an indefinable cognitive interest, a basic-applied divide and a fundamentally ahistorical outlook suggests that questions about the 'social relevance' of psychology are likely to linger. In the meantime, however, the marketization of institutions of higher education has led to 'market relevance' becoming an important arbiter of 'relevant' knowledge. It has become a tenet of faith that universities nowadays have "to operate (under government pressure) as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 143). Already in the latter decades of the twentieth century, philosophers and sociologists of science began noticing certain changes to the then dominant mode of knowledge production – in particular, a growing spirit of intersectoral collaborativeness. In the United States and elsewhere, the key drivers of this process were the globalizing economy, increased economic competition and changing public policies (Kleinman & Vallas, 2001). Indeed, "[t]he fiscal crisis of the welfare states and the neoliberal course of the Reagan and Thatcher governments made the battle against budget deficits and against government spending into a political priority" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 599). With state sponsorship of education on the wane, universities turned increasingly to industry for financial backing while the 'social relevance' sought by critical students was converted into the "economic relevance [of] business and industry in the knowledge society" (Lorenz, 2012, p. 600) .

With its central focus on 'cost-efficiency', higher education in this brave new world has undergone several important transformations. Tuition fees have risen, teaching loads have increased, untenured staff have been 'bought in' to manage those loads, and research practices have been commodified to a considerable degree (Lorenz, 2012). The doctrine of scientific disinterestedness must contend, now, with the challenge of a "production-line model of research" (Couldry, 2011, p. 41) in which 'impact' – as defined by policy and economic considerations – is the primary measure of research value, while ubiquitous ranking tables for citations, individual researchers and entire institutions contribute still further to the 'McDonaldization' of universities (Lorenz, 2012). Inevitably, a deluge of commentaries has emerged in an attempt to theorize this changing ethos of higher education that appears to signal an unprecedented reordering of the relationship between science and society. Titillating phrases purporting to capture this phenomenon include *finalization science* (Böhme, van den Daele, Hohlfeld, Krohn, & Schäfer, 1983), *strategic research* (Irvine & Martin, 1984), *post-normal science* (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994), *Mode 2* (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001), *post-academic science* (Ziman, 2000), *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), the *triple helix* (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997) and *systems of innovation* (Edquist & Hommen, 1999) – leading one observer to ask if it isn't all a case of pouring "old wine in new bottles" (Weingart, 1997, p. 591).

Over time, Mode 2 has emerged as the leader of the pack (Hessels & van Lente, 2008) and is understood to supplement – rather than replace outright – the old dispensation. Having achieved its apotheosis in the form of Newtonian physics, 'Mode 1' approaches the realm of the rarefied with ritualized "claims to exceptionalism" (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. xiv). It develops, refines and preserves its own socio-cognitive rules, determines without external consultation the problems worth investigating, identifies its own practitioners and decides for itself what counts as 'good science' – with problems and their solutions being articulated from the vantage point of isolated disciplines. By contrast, Mode 2 is pursued within highly localized "contexts of application" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 3) – as required by stakeholders. But despite Mode 2 involving both supply and demand factors, it is said to entail more than the unmitigated commodification of knowledge. In particular, it is noted for a transdisciplinary posture in which a range of disciplines trains a collective gaze on a given problem, and theoretical and practical aspects engage

[3] The involvement of social psychologists in the expansion of cross-cultural psychology cannot be ascribed wholly to their pursuit of a universal social psychology. There was also a desire to understand the shared traumas of World War Two, a Cold War preoccupation with international relations (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998) and a concern – paternalistic or not – with the challenges that accompanied political independence in the Third World (Jahoda, 2009).

with one another in an iterative manner. With the generation of solutions, contexts of application change and research teams evolve. Consequently, Mode 2 is characterized by "heterogeneity and organisational diversity" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 6) and can be taken up in a variety of institutional forms.

Enhanced public awareness of the social effects of science has resulted in progressively more interest groups attempting to influence the stages of the research process. Mode 2 is correspondingly sensitive to demands for social accountability as "[t]he research towards the resolution of these [i.e. Mode 2] types of problem has to incorporate options for the implementation of the solutions and these are bound to touch the values and preferences of different individuals and groups that have been seen as traditionally outside of the scientific and technological system" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 7). A prime consideration when assessing the value of a Mode 2 solution is its social acceptability – in contrast to the internal peer review mechanism that endorses Mode 1 knowledge. Whereas success according to Mode 2 logic is a function of usefulness and efficiency, Mode 1 makes room only for "the traditional [criterion] of scientific excellence" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 18).

The utopia of transdisciplinarity represents in part a nostalgic reconstellation of the days when the 'unification of science' was still thought possible (Gibbons et al., 1994). Understood in these terms, transdisciplinarity becomes interpretable as a unique response to the needs of knowledge societies in a postmodern age of uncertainty, complexity and risk (Maasen & Lieven, 2006). Consistent programmatically with Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff's "triple helix of university-industry-government relations" (1997, p. 1), transdisciplinarity attenuates the "social distance" between science and society by rendering the former "socially accountable" to an "audit society" (Maasen & Lieven, 2006, p. 406). Yet the production of 'socially robust knowledge' (Nowotny et al., 2001) involves an epistemological stand-off between democratic representation and scientific credibility. While public governance of science in the form of "[r]ound tables, ethics commissions and citizens' juries" (Maasen & Lieven, 2006, p. 406) constitutes an *agora* of sorts – that is, "the public space in which 'science meets the public', and in which the public 'speaks back' to science" (Nowotny et al., 2001, p. 247) – it also situates science in a neo-liberal, post-welfare world in which *enterprise* becomes the name of the game (Maasen & Lieven, 2006). But because Mode 2 embodies an apolitical account of knowledge production that appears to naturalize the change process, it ends up perpetuating a form of false-consciousness (Pestre, 2003). The Mode 2 disposition – networking, mobility, adaptability, creativity and egalitarianism – conceals a revamped capitalist ethic that has nicked the 'social relevance' agenda of the 'May 68' generation. Perhaps, then, the students' legacy *was* one of "libertarianism which came to be appropriated by a Right eager to dismantle bureaucracies and the welfare state" (Müller, 2002, p. 33).

The exact significance of the Mode 2 knowledge regime remains a matter of controversy. For some, the differences between the two modes offer compelling evidence that science was once "an autonomous enclave that is now being crushed under the weight of narrowly commercial or political interests" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 22). And yet science has never lived 'outside' the social fabric: it has seldom been a reluctant partner, influencing society and being influenced all the while. At the very least, however, it is obvious to most academics that the present climate is no longer as accommodating of their 'ivory tower' colleagues (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997). Ironically, the phenomenal success of the scientific mission has forced practitioners into cultivating a business savvy capable of attracting the attentions of strings-attached funders (Barnes, 1985).

8. Whither psychology?

While the marketization of higher education will seem anathema to some, it is unlikely to upset psychology's regular order of business. After all, when one considers the discipline's tried-and-tested facility for meeting the administrative needs of powerful social groups, the rise of a neoliberal rationality within the academy does not appear especially threatening. If anything, the diffuseness of the field has meant that challenges have frequently emerged *internally*. As the latest case in point, it is now being claimed that the discipline has constellated itself around the divergent camps of 'hard' neuro-cognitive and 'soft' cultural-discursive psychology (Harré & Moghaddam, 2012). Despite the exaggerated quality of this depiction, it remains analytically useful for throwing into relief once more the Habermasian matter of competing interests in psychology.

Commentators suggest that the rise of the neurosciences involves "a shift in human ontology … [that] enables us to govern ourselves differently" (Rose, 2007, p. 82). The now dominant notion of a 'plastic' human brain is nothing to be celebrated because "plasticity firmly situates the subject in a normative, neoliberal ethic of personal self-care and responsibility linked to modifying the body" (Pitts-Taylor, 2010, p. 639). The neurosciences, in other words, endorse a neoliberal outlook that replaces "an ethic of state care with an emphasis on individual responsibility and market fundamentalism" (Pitts-Taylor, 2010). Some claim that, at the heart of neuroscience discourse is an "economy of the brain" (Rose & Abi-Rached, 2013, p. 16), which, since it centers on the social *cost* of brain disease, is not only of evident 'market relevance' but dovetails neatly with the empirical-analytic interests of prediction and control. On the other hand, cultural-discursive psychology recognizes "the primacy of representation … and its locus in situated social practices rather than abstracted mental models" (Edwards, 1995, p. 63). Whereas neuro-cognitive psychology is concerned with observation and measurement, cultural-discursive psychology is preoccupied with interpretation – that is, the excavation of *meaning* – leading to the corresponding interests of understanding and critique. Considering the commitment of discourse analysts to the proposition that the world can be other than it is (Willig, 1998), the cultural-discursive pole within psychology is viewed in some quarters as synonymous with an emancipatory form of 'social relevance'.

It is tempting to cast the emergent bifurcation of the discipline as a struggle between 'establishment' and 'anti-establishment' forces, as if the latter were operating 'outside' power (see Foucault, 1980). Crucially, however, the 'market relevance' of neuro-cognitive psychology is no less 'social' than the 'social relevance' of critical-discursive psychology – it is worth noting, after all, that each of the Habermasian knowledge traditions claims to want to 'change the world'. Moreover, the academy of the twenty-first century has been transformed into a veritable battle-ground in which *all* are implicated; both the 'hard' sciences *and* 'soft' humanities that constitute the 'temporally dominated' disciplines are engaged in perpetual struggle over intellectual and academic capital (Bourdieu, 1988; 2001). It would be naïve to imagine, therefore, that cultural-discursive psychologists are any less 'entrepreneurial' than their neuro-cognitive counterparts. At any rate, the longstanding conflict between basic and applied psychology suggests that psychologists have been at war with each other since the very beginning. The Bourdieusian model, that is, does not predict the commencement – but the intensification – of hostilities within the discipline.

9. Concluding remarks

In psychology, debates about 'relevance' should not be read as cause for panic. For various reasons described in this paper, the controversy surrounding 'relevance' is simply unavoidable: first, the discipline has failed to confirm either its cognitive interest or its subject matter; second, psychology is dependent on a disinterested, 'socially irrelevant' basic science for the authorization of its knowledge claims; and third, the discipline has always struggled to accommodate sociality on account of its natural scientific methodolatry. Of course, none of this would have mattered had it not been for the litany of social upheavals that has dominated world history over the last half-century. Indeed, with protest politics more visible than ever and scientific accountability now an article of faith, the future of 'relevance' seems assured.

For academics in general and psychologists in particular, the obsession with capital has transformed 'relevance' into something of a chimera, overused to the extent of becoming all things to all-comers. For some, it may seem obvious that a process of 'repressive tolerance' (Marcuse, 1965) has neutralized its once revolutionary potential, co-opting it into a hegemonic neoliberal rationality. They may argue that the capitalist supremacy is one half of a 'fusion' whose complementary aspect is the technological subjugation of nature – and that its overthrow can only be achieved by an analogous repudiation of the scientific method (Edgar, 2006). Notwithstanding reservations about the unity of that method (Feyerabend, 1975), this would almost certainly spell the end of psychology as the world has come to know it. But historians will urge caution on the grounds that 'relevance' discourse is a necessary feature of the discipline's constitution. Besides, 'social relevance' is neither a transcendent ideal nor an inherently radical concept and, since it is rooted in the social, economic and political exigencies of the day, its meaning can never be finalized.

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