

Depoliticization and Public Participation: Extending Madsen (2013)

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Clinical psychologists have always had influence within the setting of therapeutic relationships. However, the influence of psychology as a scientific discipline has gained ground in more public arenas over time. As has long been the case for certain members of other professions, like medical doctors, expressions of opinion made by psychologists are increasingly valued as 'expert opinion', and by that nature can have substantial influence in the public debate. In short, western society has been 'psychologized' (Gordo & De Vos, 2010). Madsen (2013, this edition) points out that while the ideal of objectivity and value-free science has been at least partially abandoned in the philosophy of science, psychology as an academic discipline has not caught up with the development. He argues that psychologists are not sufficiently conscious of their own values and of the values embodied by their profession when they deal with the general public. Specifically, he argues that psychologists, at least in certain cases, may effectively contribute to *depoliticization* of important societal issues. In simple terms, 'depoliticization' simply means to render something apolitical. In this specific context, it refers to a process in which questions of values or ethics are framed as being questions of scientific truth, thereby making them harder to debate. This perspective is clearly worth entertaining. In this commentary, I will start by briefly tracing the history of the term depoliticization. Then, I will discuss how politicians and the media create an environment in which expert groups, psychologists included, are in danger of becoming willing or unwilling contributors to depoliticization.

LONG STORY SHORT

The concept of depoliticization has been around for a long time, as exemplified by Wilhelm Reich (1934), under the pseudonym Ernst Parell, in the pamphlet "What is Class Consciousness?" written in exile in Denmark:

"Love of sport, the attraction of men in military uniforms (which please the girls, and vice versa), marching songs, etc., are generally, under the conditions obtaining in the proletarian movement today, anti-revolutionary factors because the political reaction has far greater possibilities of satisfying the demands they create. Football, in particular, has a directly depoliticizing effect and encourages the reactionary tendencies of youth. "(Reich, 1971)

At the time, the concept of 'depoliticization' was used in a quite concrete and personal sense, pointing to individuals or groups that over time lost their political interest, power, or mandate. A more recent use of the term was concerned not with individuals or functions, but with ideas or concepts, as exemplified by Robert Proctor (1988)

"The Nazis depoliticized questions of crime, poverty, and sexual or political deviance by casting them in surgical or otherwise medical (and seemingly apolitical) terms [...] Politics

pursued in the name of science or health provided a powerful weapon in the Nazi ideological arsenal.”(Proctor, 1988, p. 290)

Madsen (2013, this issue), uses the term in a slightly different way, referring to more subtle situations in which decisions that arguably should be subject to public debate are rendered apolitical and delegated to expert groups. For example, many tasks of prioritization that were previously under direct political control have been delegated to economists and technocrats under the era of new public management (NPM). Whether this is good or bad is outside the scope of this commentary, but NPM expressly involves movement of decision power in the public sector from politicians to management, a process which fits nicely within the description of depoliticization.

A POLITICAL FIREWALL

Politics is concerned with trade-offs between different values, and about prioritization of specific goals or certain groups over other goals and groups. Prioritizing specific goals, interests, or groups intrinsically implies giving lower priority to other goals, interests, or groups. This creates the perception (and sometimes, reality) of winners and losers. Within modern democracies, with relatively short electoral periods, being responsible for allocation of losses can be costly: proponents of the losing side are motivated to protest – usually more strongly than the ‘winners’ are motivated to celebrate - ‘losses loom larger than gains’ (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This imbalance can create situations in which incumbents are penalized by voters regardless of how they prioritize (Narud & Valen, 2001). To mitigate the costs of necessary prioritization, politicians may be motivated to create ‘firewalls’ between themselves and certain unavoidable decisions. One way to achieve this is to naturalize decisions by pointing to experts or scientific evidence. However, caution, even when well-founded, is not necessarily considered a good quality: Harry S Truman is famously quoted for asking his chief of staff to find a one-armed economist, being tired with advisors constantly moderating their statements by saying “On the other hand.” Politicians turning to expert groups or scientists for information is not a bad thing by and of itself, but they are unlikely to select answers based primarily on their scientific or clinical robustness; for the purpose of avoiding the blame for unpopular decisions, answers should preferably be simple, clear-cut, final, and unencumbered by the numerous caveats and nuances typical of well-founded scientific evidence. The wishes of politicians can foster an environment conducive for depoliticization as discussed by Madsen.

MEDIA AND PUNDITS

Scientists and experts often have knowledge, experience, and information that are pertinent valuable to the public debate. However, the criteria for getting air-time or getting published in newspapers are very different from the criteria of academic publication. Where the peer-review process and scientific ideals dictate that conclusions should be modest and presented with reservations regarding potential caveats and restrictions, the opposite is often required to reach the general public through mass media. Motivated primarily by public demand, the mass media has limited interest in presenting modest voices if more extreme alternatives are available. Reservations, reflections on own values, and considerations of multiple perspectives are worthy ideals that, when followed, may reduce the chance of reaching the public. Madsen’s first two

examples relate to psychologists' expressions of opinion in the media. If they had moderated their messages and reflected on their own position related to the values in question, they would risk not getting published. The media nurtures pundits who are willing to make bold statements without reservations. What eventually reaches the public may not be representative of the field as a whole.

THE EGO OF EXPERTS

Politicians come to experts for simple, universal, and certain answers to complex questions involving conflicting values and competing interests. The media fawns on scientists who are willing to take a stand, and have less interest in more balanced and cautioned utterances. Making normative statements on the basis of expert knowledge can be an effective rhetorical device, and blurring the line between what questions can be answered empirically and what can be answered only based values may be tempting. Experts, psychologists not excluded, often hold strong opinions and a wish to influence public policy. Combined with the general influence of psychology in society, psychologists are in a prime position to influence the public discourse. When the interests of politicians, the sensationalism of mass media, and self-interests of psychologists all work in the direction of potential depoliticization, there is reason to worry.

I do not agree with all Madsen's analyses – particularly his third case, pertaining to the Bergen Child Study, seems to me relatively removed from a problem of depoliticization. However, the general question he poses about the contribution of psychology to depoliticization is timely, and the analytical tools he presents are useful. Hopefully, future analyses of this kind may initiate a movement toward more self-scrutiny within the discipline.

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