

*Rambling reflections of an “evidence-base-policy” sceptic
prompted by the January-February issue of “The Psychologist”*

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Abstract

The January-February special issue of *The Psychologist* was devoted to a series of articles largely celebrating psychologists’ role in relation to the Covid “pandemic”. However, like the UK Covid enquiry, most authors accepted the conventional narrative without question. The current author briefly summarises evidence showing that, from the beginning it was known that not only that many of what were taken to be basic “facts” were just plain wrong, but also, and more importantly, the evaluations neglected important “side effects” (i.e. systemic effects) which would have fundamentally challenged policies like lockdown and “vaccination”. More importantly still, the article argues that, to meaningfully contribute to “evidence-based policy”, the evaluations of proposed policy interventions must offer *comprehensive* evaluations – evaluations of *all* the short and long term, personal and social, desired and undesirable outcomes. To do this it is necessary to embrace systemic, as distinct from reductionist, science. Evidence that the proposed policies would be in the long-term public interest is entirely lacking and there is no discussion of the role of massive diffusion of mental viruses and their recursive social consequences. The role of governance in this situation merits the urgent attention of psychologists.

Having been uncomfortable with articles *The Psychologist* had previously published in connection with psychologists’ role in relation to Covidⁱ, I picked up the January/February Issue with a heavy heart.

My fears were confirmed.

The articles proceeded as if the case for the government’s ... indeed world ... response to the threat was, essentially, appropriate.

However, early in 2020, I had attended a meeting of the UK chapter of the International Systems Dynamics Societyⁱⁱ which had (a) called into question Ferguson’s projections of the potential impact of COVID [and included an important paper by Pruytⁱⁱⁱ] and (b) highlighted the importance of setting any recommendations that might be made in the context of the systems processes (forces) that are/were involved.

I had also reviewed the proceedings of an OECD meeting which had shown that the disbenefits of lockdowns were likely to exceed the benefits by a huge margin^{iv}. (This may be an appropriate point at which to mention that Teir predictions were later confirmed in a large international study^v which showed that, while deaths per life saved varied greatly between countries, it would not be wide of the mark to suggest that, overall, about 150 lives were lost per life saved.)

All of this sat on top of my profound distrust of activists who, with great vigour, set about imposing single-factor, non-systemic, “solutions” to some problem highlighted by some authority – thereby, especially if they become part of some collective social movement, unleashing often disastrous unanticipated consequences. (The classic examples come from Mao, but numerous examples are to be found in the world today. Such examples are, however, on the one hand, merely practical illustrations of the operation of a fundamental law of systems science which states that single-factor (non-systemic) intervention in social systems always has counterintuitive, and usually counterproductive, consequences^{vi}. But, on the other hand, they embody mass crazes poorly studied by psychologists. [The articles in the January issue of *The Psychologist* make many references to the psychological basis of many of our social problems, but they make no mention of this huge, pervasive, socio-psychological problem ...better termed elephant in the room.]’

More generally, I seriously distrust the work of many “scientists” (physical as well as social) who promote their work as a contribution to “evidence-based policy” without considering the need to set their work in a systemic context^{vii}.

I am tempted to give examples of the neglect of the systemic effects (often called “side effects”) of mRNA interventions (usually misleadingly termed “vaccinations”), but to do so would take me outside of what may be considered my domain of professional competence. (Although some of those who contributed to the January issue seem to have had no qualms about this.)

So let me back up a bit.

As I argued in my address to the Psychology of Education Section in 2020^{viii}, to be worthy of recognition as a contribution to “evidence based policy” a study must, because of the multiple systemic effects of any intervention, make at least an attempt to identify *all* the short and long-term (what is good in the short term may be bad in the long term), personal and social (what is good for the individual may be bad for society), desired and undesired, desirable and undesirable effects of that intervention.^{ix}

Although I am reluctant, because of his wider work, to cite some results from his work as an example, John Hattie^x contributed a synthesis (meta-analysis) of 800 meta-analyses of, loosely, “what works in education”.

The majority of these studies focussed only on attainment test scores as the criterion, thereby neglecting other desired and undesirable outcomes.

In point of fact undesirable outcomes include failure to recognise and nurture huge numbers of desirable talents. (Andersson^{xi}, drawing together the available snippets of research, concluded that about one-third of pupils are seriously damaged by current educational systems.)

How can such limited research be seen as a useful basis for formulating educational policy? Such policy should, shouldn’t it?, be based on a broad picture. (I will avoid entering a debate about the respective roles of the politician and scientist given the recursive loops in priorities, preoccupations, and funding.)

But at least Hattie found 800 meta-analyses that were worth considering.

MacKay^{xii} and his colleagues set out to conduct a meta-analysis of what interventions worked for “autism”. They ended up with a base of 5000+ potential studies. But, after reviewing the methodology, samples, etc. they ended up with only 5 or 6 studies that were worth considering. What was that about a “replication crisis” and the “neglect of evidence-based policy studies”?

Returning to the role of psychologists in relation to COVID and the part played by contributors to the numerous committees described by some of the contributors to the January Issue and the numerous other activists promoting single-factor interventions, I have to say that I regard much such work unethical.

I do not find much evidence to support the fundamental claim that it is “in the long-term public interest” to promote these policies.

We have too often encountered too many such claims, loudly and boldly asserted, that turn out to deliver exactly the opposite.

As far as I am concerned, the lesson to be learned from what might be termed ‘the COVID fiasco’ is very different indeed from those that seem to have been drawn by most of those who penned these articles.

More specifically, looked at via the reportings of intermediaries, I have the distinct impression that the workings of the bodies supposedly appointed to supervise these activities have been anything but satisfactory. Among other things, they seem to have been prone, because of their adoption of a shared narrative, to dismiss as “conspiracy theories” observations that later turned out to be true.

In my opinion, more than anything else we, as psychologists, have a responsibility to work toward the evolution of more appropriate ways of running our society^{xiii}, paying particular attention to the role of **science**/evidence^{xiv}.

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ⁱ Raven, 2020, 2022

ⁱⁱ Pruyt, E. (2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ Pruyt, E. (2013)

^{iv} OECD/ Ramos, G., Hynes, W. (2020).

^v Allen, D.W. (2022)

^{vi} (Forrester, J.W. 1971/1995).

^{vii} Forrester, J.W. (1971/1995), Raven, J. (2016/2019, 2022)

^{viii} Raven, J. (2020a)

^{ix} This translates into a call for "comprehensive evaluation".

^x Hattie, J. A. C. (2009)

^{xi} Andersson, B-E. (2001)

^{xii} MacKay T. et al (2018) Attempts to conduct a meta-analysis of effectiveness of interventions re autism.

^{xiii} Raven, J. (2024)

^{xiv} Raven, J. 2020, 2022 (June.) I should perhaps, earlier in this comment, drawn attention to the important distinction to be made between reductionist and systemic science.