

Ask Dr. Robertson 3—Social and Psychological Sciences Gone Wrong



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Image Credit: Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson.

By [Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#)

[Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson](#) is a Registered Doctoral Psychologist with expertise in Counselling Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Human Resource Development. He earned qualifications in Social Work too.

His research interests include memes as applied to self-knowledge, the evolution of religion and spirituality, the Aboriginal self's structure, residential school syndrome, prior learning recognition and assessment, and the treatment of attention deficit disorder and suicide ideation.

In addition, he works in anxiety and trauma, addictions, and psycho-educational assessment, and relationship, family, and group counseling. Here we talk about different notions of empirical and ethical wrongness (and rightness) in science in general and then in psychological and social sciences in particular.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When do social and psychological sciences go wrong? In that, the hidden premises of the field poison the research questions asked and skew the findings in response to the questions.

Dr. Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson: The first part of your question, Scott, is “when do sciences go wrong?” The answer, of course, is “all the time.” Science is, at its core, careful observation. It is always possible that our observations are imperfect, or that our interpretations of well-observed phenomena are mistaken. Therefore, scientists will always acknowledge that their knowledge claims are provisional, dependent on further evidence. This is why, in modern science, replication and peer review are so important in identifying any biases that may have affected interpretations placed on research.

You may have been referring to Thomas Kuhn with respect to the second part of your question on hidden premises. Kuhn said that for a discipline to become a science it had to be united by a paradigm which he defined as a body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief. In 1970 he declared psychology to be a proto-science because it lacked such a unifying paradigm. A quarter of a century later Pat Duffy Hutcheon examined three possible paradigmatic formulations in psychology—the psychoanalysis of Freud, the developmentalism of Piaget, and the classical behaviourism of Skinner—and she found all had failed to establish themselves as the dominant paradigm in psychology for various reasons. I believe that since then a fourth paradigm has implicitly taken root in the field and that is the subject of the final chapter in a book I am writing about the evolution of the self. That paradigm is based on our self-definition as a species that includes our selves as discreet, relatively stable, volitional, reflective and rational beings. At this time results within the field of psychotherapy are overwhelmingly interpreted from this cognitivist paradigm. Consistently obtained scientific results that cannot be understood within this paradigm would force a scientific revolution replacing this paradigm with another more inclusive one. I suppose you could say the research and interpretations of findings are “poisoned” by the assumptions built into the more primitive paradigm. The classical example of this would be the pre-Copernican notion that Earth was the center of the universe. Using this paradigm, the planets exhibited complicated orbits around Earth, sometime speeding up or slowing down, performing strange loops and so on until the paradigm shifted placing our sun in the center of the solar system. I have argued that an emerging paradigm in psychology includes a self-definition of us as a species as volitional and capable of rational choice (see: https://www.hawkeyeassociates.ca/images/pdf/academic/Free_Will.pdf). It has been argued that such a view favours the construct of individualism and “poisons” the individuals so-counselled against collectivism. I do not happen to share that view. But that is an academic debate.

I do not believe the general public perceives the self-correcting tentativeness built into science. Instead of viewing science as a method for obtaining knowledge, they often view it as a belief system like a religion or an ideology. Religions and ideologies encourage this misunderstanding because they identify Truth, with a capital T, as authoritative and absolute. If scientific evidence runs counter to what they take as authoritatively true, then science is seen as a defective belief system that has “gone wrong.” An example of this would be the attack on the theory of evolution by people who want to believe Earth is only 6,000 years old. A second example would be people who believe environmental scientists are part of a great conspiracy to fake evidence related to global warming. A third example would be people who wish to think that evidence debunking

notions that our minds are a “blank slate” when we are born are part of a patriarchal backlash. In an interview with the late Carl Sagan, the Dalai Lama said that if science proved reincarnation was impossible, then Buddhism would have to change. We need to carry something of that understanding into all our belief systems or we end up becoming the mindless servant of those belief systems.

Jacobsen: If we look at some aspects of interests for you, and if we look at some long and dark periods in Canadian history for some demographics within Canada, have social and psychological sciences been utilized in such a way to impact Indigenous communities disproportionately negatively? If so, how so?

Robertson: When I was Director of Health and Social Development for the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations during the 1980s, many chiefs repeated the refrain that they had been “studied to death.” They were, of course, not claiming that they had been physically harmed. They were claiming that there had been numerous studies and they had not seen any positive results. In some cases, studies were conducted but the results were not communicated back to the communities in question. I believe that knowledge should be “open access” and shared between all stakeholders.

The question as to how psychological knowledge has been utilized is, of course, a different question. While I was Director of Health and Social Development, a band education authority in a reserve in northern Saskatchewan hired a psychometrician from Edmonton to assess the intelligence of their elementary students. Sixty percent of the students were labelled mentally handicapped. My master’s thesis is on cultural bias in intelligence testing, and I know the reserve community in question and I can tell you that the psychometrician must not have followed test protocol with respect to testing children whose second language is English and who come from cultural traditions do not favour speeded, timed tests. At first, the band education committee was happy with these results as they received considerable extra funding for special needs children. But this was, in my opinion, a false economy with a negative impact. You see, educational programming for mentally handicapped is quite different from what was needed. When I was Director of Life Skills for the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College during its early years, we educated students from often remote communities in those habits of mind and organizational skills that were needed for academic success. The program added an extra year to the student’s university education, but it was incredibly successful. Teaching students cross-cultural skills for academic success in a modern industrial society is better than teaching independent living skills aimed at the mentally challenged in such cases.

Jacobsen: Using the same sciences but asking better research questions with the greater good of society and individuals in mind, what may alleviate some of the impacts of phenomena including residential school syndrome?

Robertson: A good research question is one that when answered extends our knowledge in some way. Accumulated knowledge may then be used to bring improvements to society but that is beyond the purview of scientists in their role as scientists. I am suspicious of power-brokers limiting research based on some notion of the “greater good.” For example, a former prime

minister limited research into climate change presumably because he and his party felt this was in the greater good. Decisions by authorities on what constitutes the greater good are often ideologically based. That being said, research into ways to alleviate human suffering interests me, and as you have alluded, residential school syndrome has been one of my interests.

As a kid who stayed with the families of friends on reserve in the 60s, I knew something about the dark history of Indian residential schools. So, I was surprised when chiefs in Saskatchewan commissioned me, along with my colleague Perry Redman, to do research into keeping one of these schools open after they had been closed elsewhere in the country. Later, I was hired as a school psychologist with a specialty in youth suicide prevention at a different Indian Residential School that was kept open under an Amerindian administration. About a decade after that I was commissioned by Indian Child and Family Services in Lac La Ronge to assess the students at one of the last remaining residential schools in the country. Then, at the turn of the millennium, I accepted a contract with the Aboriginal Healing Foundation to provide psychological support to various projects aimed at alleviating the effects of residential schools in northern Saskatchewan. I have published articles on residential school syndrome and the related concept of historic trauma.

Residential school syndrome is a form of post traumatic stress disorder that affects a minority of people who attended residential schools and is characterized by symptoms like extreme rage, lack of emotional connection with one has children, and aggressive alcohol and drug abuse in addition to those symptoms that are normally associated with PTSD. I have found a combination of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy coupled with aspects of Narrative Therapy that draws on the tradition of aboriginal storytelling as a way of meaning making to be effective. Treatment needs to be individualized. Some clients have benefited from learning and practicing aboriginal traditions, but others have a different worldview. In one of my articles I describe how the elders in one community found attempts by their band health administration to introduce Aboriginal Spirituality to be oppressive (see:

<https://www.hawkeyeassociates.ca/images/pdf/academic/ColonizationStanley.pdf>)

A concern I have is the tendency of some to essentialize and universalize experience. One woman approached me worried that she might be “in denial.” She had good memories of her residential school experience and was leading a happy and productive life, but the negative media reports about these schools had led her to question her remembered experiences. Not all residential schools were the same and not all students at such schools suffered or witnessed abuse. Even worse, in my opinion, is the concept of historic trauma, where a whole race of people is said to suffer from a psychological condition irrespective of when, where and under what conditions colonization occurred. In my mind, undo psychologising is destructive of peoples’ mental health.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Robertson.