

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

How can the studies of the mind and human social systems turn out bad?

March 6, 2019 by [Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#) [Leave a Comment](#)



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.

The interview started on the issue of when the sciences, in general, go wrong. Robertson's answer was simply "all the time," in terms of a preliminary answer. Remarking, of course, that proper care in observation, attention to detail, and precision are part and parcel of the scientific process, where, even with imperfections in observation, the proper perspective is that science is tentative, provisional, and perpetually incomplete.

"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," Robertson explained, "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."

Way back in the 1970s, there was a declaration that psychology exists as something like a proto-science, an inchoate science, or, perhaps, in some ways, pre-scientific in the modern sense. The reason for this is the incompleteness of the world explained by the scientific processes adhered to, within psychology. It does not have the unifying framework of plate tectonics and continental drift linked to gradualism within geological sciences, evolution by natural selection in biological sciences, the germ theory of disease in medical sciences, Quantum Mechanics and General & Special Relativity of modern physics with – at least – standard Big Bang cosmogony, the Table of Elements of Mendeleev for chemistry, the information theoretic and communication theoretic foundation in the modern world of mass communications and information technologies – including Moore's Law for decades, and so on.

Psychology remains an epistemologically and, therefore, almost entirely, ontologically disjunct endeavor. Some will state freedom of the will, consciousness, and qualia – or the traits of experience (e.g., some may of have heard the oft-said and always-now boring phrase, "The redness of red," akin to the phrase "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" of the late astrophysicist Dr. Carl Sagan and variations found in Simone LaPlace, David Hume, and Marcello Truzzi) – as base level problems in psychology without clear solutions. Part of the lack of clarity is the lack of a unified theory, or paradigm rather, in psychology.

Robertson stated, "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 behaviorism 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."

The title of the upcoming book was not given within the context of the interview. However, we can look forward to updates on it. But if we look into the furtherance of the conversation between Robertson and I, the former paradigm of psychotherapy – probably within some remnants floating around in their community – was the cognitivist paradigm. This paradigm was, simply put, a reaction to behaviorism’s limitations in a lack of a coherent explanation of the internal operations of the mind for a simple reason: behaviorists just rejected serious attempts at explications of the inside mechanics of the human mind from early life to late life and death.

“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,” Robertson explained, “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.”

In some interesting [writing](#) on freedom of the will, Robertson made an argument for an emergent psychological paradigm within the studies of the mind with volition and rational choice as fundamental in the species-wide self-definition. Some, in response, see this as a construct of individualism while, also, poisoning individuals against what some deem collectivism. He does not share this critique, but views this as, at root, an academic debate for the time.

Robertson considers the public not seeing the slow, incomplete progress of science and, in particular, its own correcting methodology built into itself. Science does not create knowledge or assert wisdom as in the case of various ideologies and religions, but, instead, harbors a tentativeness without an assumption of absolute knowledge.

“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,” Robertson stated.

He recalled an interview with the late Dr. Carl Sagan, of *Cosmos* fame, and the Dalai Lama, of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. In it, the Dalai Lama stated that if there was an impossibility of reincarnation, then the belief in reincarnation within Buddhism would need to alter to the more accurate scientific view at that time. Robertson considered this an important aspect of remaining tentative in conclusions so as not to be servants of belief systems, whatever the source.

Within the contexts of the Canadian story, the narrative of Canada, we come to the issues of dark patches – long ones – in the historical record with the Residential School system or the

residential schools and the associated problems of enforcement of one religious culture with the sanction of the government, and then the abuse, the intergenerational impacts of the abuse, the imposition of a bureaucratic developmental model rather than a community development model, and the needs of the community being ignored for long periods of time – right into the present.

Robertson, in reflection on work as the Director of Health and Social Development for the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations in the 1980s, stated, "...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."

Robertson then made a distinction and transitioned into a conversation on the ways in which the psychological knowledge acquired has been utilized in the past and in the current period with the emergent fourth paradigm. For example, while the Director of Health and Social Development, a band education authority hired a psychometrician for a reserve in northern Saskatchewan. The psychometrician was Albertan and from Edmonton in particular.

This Edmontonian psychometrician tested the intelligence of the elementary pupils on the reserve, where 60% of those students were labeled mentally handicapped or were found to be mentally handicapped based on the results of the psychometric testing. Robertson noted the cultural bias in intelligence testing. In fact, Robertson knows the northern Saskatchewan community from the testing.

"...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 favor speeded, timed tests. At first, the band education committee was happy with these results as they received considerable extra funding for special needs children," Robertson explained, "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.

Robertson in further reflection on former professional capacities as the Director of Life Skills for the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. He described how he educated students from a variety of remote communities in the forms of habits and skills required for academic success. The program added one year to the university education of the students, but the initiative with the adaptations was incredibly successful." Robertson found an important part of the educational process where the education in cross-cultural skills necessary for academic success, especially in the context of modern industrialized society and the global economy.

The conversation moved to a closing section on the alleviation of the impacts of RSS or residential school syndrome. Robertson separated the task of scientists to study the natural world and then the work for the greater good. In this sense, science is good for knowledge about the world. The question about a greater good is another question, which can mean those in power – the "power-brokers" – can abuse their influence and control and, in fact, limit research into

things, including climate change – as happened in Canada under the leadership of former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper.

“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,” Robertson stated, “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.”

The world is complex and rarely black and white. In this gray example, Robertson was hired as a youth suicide prevention expert, as a school psychologist, in a different Indian Residential School. Under Amerindian administration, the school remained open. Robertson continued to explain how he was “commissioned” by Indian Child and Family Services in Lac La Ronge in order to have a better look at the students in “one of the last remaining residential schools in the country.”

Robertson stated, “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.”

RSS has been identified as one form of PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder affecting some minority of individuals who have attended the residential schools in Canada. The symptomatology includes “extreme rage, lack of emotional connection with one [who] has children, and aggressive alcohol and drug abuse in addition to those symptoms that are normally associated with PTSD.”

In the work of Robertson, which has its own noble underpinning, in my opinion, includes a combination of CBT or Cognitive Behaviour Therapy – probably one of the most common and widely used forms of therapy – alongside Narrative Therapy. The purpose is to use a form of traditional Aboriginal storytelling as one way in which to construct meaning. One view in the psychological community is that human beings are meaning-making beings. Narrative Therapy follows in this tradition.

Robertson emphasized the import of individualization of the treatment for the clients, as in an individual assessment and treatment per client or patient. He described how some have had benefits from the practices and learning experiences about Turtle Island or “North American” Aboriginal traditions and spirituality and, in turn, ways of looking at the world. In [an article](#) by Robertson, he noted how some elders feel attempted introduction of Aboriginal Spirituality, by the band health administration, is somewhat or simply oppressive.

“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,” Robertson concluded, “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.”