

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

"It is a challenge," Harding argues in her book *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (1991), "to figure out just which are the regressive and which the progressive tendencies brought into play in any particular scientific or feminist project, and how to advance the progressive and inhibit the regressive ones" (p. 11). The present work undertakes this challenge with respect to psychological theories and practices. In this introductory chapter I present some of the thoughts and aspirations that led me to write this book. This introduction should help to situate the text in the context of the social sciences in general, and of psychology in particular.

First, I would like to say a few words about the book's title. By "the morals and politics of psychology" I mean primarily the implicit social ethics of psychology, and the moral consequences of the discipline for the acceptance and transformation of power relations in society. The subtitle defines the contents of the book more specifically. By "psychological discourse and the status quo" I allude simply to the relationship between psychological theories and the current state of societal affairs. Implied in the expression *psychological discourse* is the assumption that this particular kind of language is saturated with social and political meanings that have serious repercussions for those directly and indirectly affected by it (Edwards and

Potter 1992; Parker 1992). The moral nature of these implications for the preservation of the societal status quo is the major concern of this work.

## CRITICAL STANDPOINTS

When the expression *critical thinking* is invoked in psychology, it is used almost exclusively to refer to epistemological considerations such as methodological rigor, logical reasoning in deriving conclusions, and adequacy of generalizations. In essence, the term *critical thinking* is reserved for questioning the "scientific" grounds of psychological postulates. However, there is another possible and neglected use of this concept. It refers to the critical thinking involved in examining the social, political, and moral assumptions implicit in psychological theories and practices. Psychologists, for the most part, receive thorough training in critical thinking as it applies to the analysis of empirical positivist research. What psychologists do not receive during their preparation are the skills necessary to scrutinize the ideological repercussions of particular forms of theorizing. This contrast is evidenced in just about any psychology undergraduate or graduate program.

One of my goals here is to advance the political critical standpoint. The need to be educated in the political, social, and moral dimensions of psychology is just as important as being taught how to evaluate the methodology and research design of a study in human behavior. Nevertheless, the moral and political critical standpoint is still foreign to applied mainstream psychology (Bulhan 1985; Howitt 1991; Ussher and Nicolson 1992). If current training in psychotherapy fails to educate students on crucial moral aspects of their work directly affecting their clients (London 1986), then the problem is even deeper when it comes to the more distant social ramifications of their endeavors. Kovel (1988) argues that

the prevailing 'psy' professions . . . of psychiatry, psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatric social work, and so forth, consistently refuse to carry out this examination. Indeed, an opacity to the actual social basis of psy practice is one of the defining features of these professions. Generally speaking, this deficit is covered by a thick membrane of technocracy, which deflects any questioning in advance, indeed, rules out the possibility of questioning, the 'pure, value free, and scientific' pursuit of Mental Health. (p. 119)

Literature concerning the traditional scientific critical standpoint abounds. By contrast, material pertaining to the moral and political standpoint, while increasing, is less plentiful and rarely reaches students and mainstream psychologists. This is largely because, among other things, political and ethical critiques are written for small, specialist audiences. My hope is to stimulate discussion in wider circles as to the merits of the moral and political critical standpoint. Here, this approach is employed primarily to examine the moral and sociopolitical repercussions of central theories of personality and their respective use in the applied branches of the profession. The focus will be primarily on mental health concepts derived from various theories and their translation into common practice. As a consequence, this study will concern itself mainly with the applied and clinical aspects of such theories as behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and psychoanalytic psychology. Practice informed by these and other bodies of knowledge will also be examined. The chapters dealing with abnormal, school, and industrial/organizational psychology explore the unquestioned ideologies of these professions.

My primary objectives, then, are to promote the political critical standpoint in psychology and to share certain insights concerning the social and moral ramifications of some influential theories and practices. To be sure, the political critical standpoint has a well-respected history in psychology, but this critical culture suffers, in my opinion, from two debilitating problems. First, as intimated above, it is written for exclusive audiences; and second, it has failed to produce cogent calls for action deriving from its critiques. I can only hope that this book makes at least a small contribution toward the correction of these shortcomings.

A critical standpoint of the kind advocated here cannot be oblivious to the standpoint of the author. In contrast to the traditional positivist critical standpoint, which assumes that the observer is value-neutral and devoid of personal projects other than the pursuit of truth, the political critical standpoint acknowledges the inevitable and ubiquitous presence of personal factors in the development of theory. All knowledge is situated in the writers' social contexts and is bounded by the interpretive horizons of its producers (Gergen 1992; Harding 1991; Reinharz 1992). Hence, I would like to disclose a few personal points of departure from which my arguments are derived. Although I am presently teaching undergraduate and graduate students in community psychology, I formerly worked as a child and family clinician in school settings. The critique to be elaborated in these pages emanates

not from a detached intellectual interest in applied psychology, but rather from concern that grew out of eight years of experience working with children and their parents. Presently I work mainly in a university setting but maintain a measure of community involvement through consultation with mental health agencies and prevention activities with school personnel, children, and immigrant families. The research that follows, even if hurtful at times to the "psy" professions, is written in a spirit of constructive criticism. I write as an insider.

Another point of departure for me, as an author, concerns the audacity of engaging in moral critique. In writing about public philosophy, distributive justice, democracy, and social change, I wish to admit and face the vast distance that separates the written word from the transformational act of promoting justice. I am painfully aware that in my activities in the community and the university I may not always be able to enact the proactive ethical precepts discussed in the last part of the book. Am I doing enough? Am I investing my efforts in the best and most productive way? Am I forever upholding the values of self-determination, distributive justice, and collaborative and democratic participation, even at the expense of organizational efficiency? I am admittedly unable to answer yes to all of the above. Yet I believe in the intrinsic merit of struggling with one's values. Attaining a higher degree of morality is a process both nurtured by and ridden with personal conflict. Personal conflict, however, need not devolve into ethical relativism or political inaction. In fact, the entire book may be seen as a prescription for the opposite.

Important as it might be, writing is only a small commitment toward changing unjust social structures. In my case, at least, writing is largely an act of privilege. There is, and there must always be, a tension in the process of denouncing dehumanizing social conditions from the comfort of your office, particularly when one belongs to a privileged group. Commitment to human welfare and social justice must mean more than writing about implicit ideologies; it must mean helping groups and individuals who don't have the luxury to write about their own misery. I admit, I write this confessional for myself as much as for the reader. Academic talk, to which I willfully contribute, can be intoxicating at times. It is because of this fear of intoxication that I feel impelled to guard against the illusion of moral rectitude inherent in composing a book-long essay about the morality of psychology. Growing up in Argentina in rather turbulent times, I learned that oppression, violence, and ideological deception are more than academic words. They are human practices with high human costs attached to

them. Suffering and pain were the lived expression of these words. Torture and political repression could not be eliminated through mere rhetoric. Perhaps as a result of this realization I grew up suspicious of written or spoken discourses that are not accompanied by committed actions. Whatever it is, the test of integrity cannot be the altitude of one's words. Concomitant actions supporting moral pronouncements must follow. Writing can be a version of complacency, and although I know it takes much more than a public confession, it is because of my profound desire to avoid this danger that I share these personal deliberations. These disclosures should also give readers an inkling as to what motivates me to keep their attention.

But if growing up in a so-called developing country instilled in me moral exigencies that are suspect in academic orations, it also made the writing of this book relatively simple. In "developing" countries, the political meanings of discourses, scientific or otherwise, are not necessarily studied in the university. Rather, they are the substance of everyday talk. The subordinated position of these countries in the world has generated a culture of skepticism toward political or scientific authoritative declamations. For individuals with even a minimal sense of cultural resistance, the question of whose interests are being served by intellectual enterprise X or Y is second nature. In this tradition, questioning the unarticulated ideology of modern psychology came to me without much effort.

## POLITICAL CRITIQUES OF PSYCHOLOGY

Having presented the general orientation and attitudes I brought to this project, I would like to show some of the scholarly antecedents of the critical standpoint proposed here. I would claim that, however powerful, these critiques tend to remain peripheral in the discipline. While this may very well be the fate of this treatise, I think we can improve the political education of the profession by formulating a more integrated critique.

There is little doubt that psychology has left its imprint on twentieth-century society. There should also be little doubt that socio-economic, cultural, and political trends have shaped, to a large extent, the methods and content of the discipline (e.g., Anderson and Travis 1983; Chorover 1985; Danziger 1990; Deese 1985; Jacoby 1975; Sampson 1977; Sarason 1981b). Nevertheless, a tradition of alleged *value-neutrality* in political matters and pseudoimmunity to ideological influences within

the profession have obstructed an in-depth examination of the interaction between social forces and psychology. To gain a better understanding of this interplay, an inquiry into the ideological elements that might have permeated psychological theories and practices is necessary.

In our era, depicted as “the age of psychology” (Haverman 1957) and “the psychological century” (Koch and Leary 1985, p. 33), the practice of behavioral science has far-reaching social and ethical implications. Is psychology promoting human welfare, as prescribed by most codes of ethics for psychologists? Or is it perhaps hindering the betterment of social conditions by guarding the interests of the status quo? An analysis of the moral, sociopolitical, and cultural values involved in psychological theories and practices will enable us to provide some answers to these crucial questions.

In view of the importance attributed in North America to psychology’s position in a wide array of social issues (Koch and Leary 1985; Sarason 1984b, 1986), an investigation of its ideological biases is called for. Such an examination will bring us closer to determining the nature of the relationship between psychology and the social order. The main proposition to be advanced is that ideological elements supportive of the social order outweigh those conducive to social changes.

Although there has been a noticeable increase in the number of investigations dealing with the ideological aspects involved in the applications of modern psychology (e.g., Albee 1990; Butcher 1983; Gergen 1985; Ingleby 1972, 1981c; Jones 1986; Kitlinger 1991b; Nahem 1981; Parker 1992; Roffe 1986; Sampson 1991; Sarason 1981b; E. V. Sullivan 1984; Ussher and Nicolson 1992; Wilkinson 1991), the literature has not yet reached mainstream psychologists. To be sure, the thesis being advanced here, namely, that psychology is instrumental in reproducing the societal status quo, has already been suggested by other psychologists. However, I contend that the existing critical literature (a) still awaits integration; (b) remains mostly, with a few noticeable exceptions (Albee 1981, 1986; Anderson and Travis 1983; Billig 1979; Chesler 1989; Gilligan 1982; Halleck 1971; Sarason 1981b) at an abstract level without proper argumentation; (c) by and large, does not address the vast social implications of psychology’s highly influential function in social reproduction; and (d) fails to consider how psychologists can deal, from an ethical point of view, with their witting or unwitting roles as social reproducers or reformers. This last shortcoming deserves special mention in view of the current proclivity of certain forms of postmodernist discourse to slide into ethical relativism

and political paralysis (Burman 1990; Parker 1992; C. Taylor 1991).

Several authors (e.g., Braginsky and Braginsky 1974; Braginsky 1985; Deese 1985) have dealt with the social reproductive functions of psychology, but that has not been their principal locus of attention. Others have dealt with this issue from the perspective of a particular field. Albee (1970, 1981, 1986) and Sarason (1981a, 1981b), for instance, focused mainly on preventive and clinical psychology; Ingleby's *Critical Psychiatry* (1981a) analyzed the connection between psychiatry and social control; and Sedgwick (1982) examined conventional theories of abnormal psychology and their inability to seriously challenge the hegemony of the conservative medical model.

Jacoby's *Social Amnesia* (1975), undoubtedly one of the major and seminal works written on conformist psychology, is mostly devoted to arguments internal to the psychoanalytic school of thought, and there is only brief mention of other influential trends such as behaviorism and humanism. Similarly, Frosh's *The Politics of Psychoanalysis* (1987) is devoted entirely to the political legacy of Freudian theory. Anderson and Travis (1983), on the other hand, are interested in the singular political impact of cognitive psychology.

The ideological implications of areas in applied psychology such as behavior modification (J. G. Holland 1978; Nahem 1981; Woolfolk and Richardson 1984), family therapy (James and McIntyre 1983; Poster 1978), and industrial psychology (Baritz 1974; Guareschi 1982; Ralph 1983) have been suggested but not fully developed.

In summary, various authors have observed the conforming influences of psychology, but they have treated the problem as a relatively isolated occurrence. No single treatise has been devoted to the *pervasiveness* of this phenomenon in psychology. By analyzing the ideological components present in central theories of human behavior, and in some widely used psychological services, I hope to show that psychology's retarding impact on social change is far from insignificant. Once this insight is available to wider sectors of the population, there might be hope that service providers and consumers alike will demand change.

Feminist psychologists, to be sure, have done much to expose the patriarchal and capitalist roots of multiple branches of mainstream modern psychology (Kitzinger 1991b; Ussher and Nicolson 1992; Zanardi 1990). Their powerful indictment of oppressive practices, however, has not yet reached the consciousness of the vast majority of providers and consumers of psychological services (Fine and Gordon 1991). When Chesler compared the state of affairs in 1989 to the situa-

tion in the early seventies, when she first published *Women and Madness*, she wrote: "Today, the mental health professions are the same patriarchal institutions I once described" (Chesler 1989, p. xx). I have little doubt that the dialogue between the opponents and the sometimes unwitting supporters of what Wilkinson (1991) calls "main/mailestream" psychology needs to be cultivated.

Perhaps the most politically scrutinized field in psychology is social psychology. Several books (e.g., Archibald 1978; Armistead 1974; Billig 1982; Parker 1989; Parker and Shotter 1990; Wexler 1983) and influential articles (e.g., Gergen 1973; Ibanez Gracia 1983; Sampson 1978) in the last two decades have reflected upon the political character of social psychology and its failure to promote human welfare. While the critique mounted by these authors is pertinent to the general theme of this volume, my specific objective is to examine fields with a more clinical orientation. Readers interested in the ideological dimensions of social psychology are referred to these insightful sources.

My second concern as to the present literature has to do with the lack of emphasis on the actual ways through which psychology performs its role of conformity promoter. Most of the reviewed studies remain at a rhetorical and rather abstract level, without elaborating on how a certain psychological activity is going to affect the individual's acceptance or rejection of society's values and norms. There is a conspicuous discrepancy between the number of allegations made against psychology for its role in preventing social change and the detailed argumentation offered to support these accusations. Allegations abound, but relatively little evidence is usually provided. Some extreme examples are found in Iaroshevskii's 1950 paper "The Eclipse of Consciousness in Contemporary American Psychology." He stated that "in the last stage of capitalism, the stage of stagnation and approaching collapse, bourgeois psychology increasingly assumes the function of plunging human consciousness into the abyss of the irrational, of depriving human life and activity of reason and meaning" (p. 34). He further regarded psychologists as *the* ideologists of capitalism and states that they "try to perpetuate capitalist exploitation, wars, inequality, oppression and to ascribe the ugliness of bourgeois society to 'human nature'" (p. 39).

Consider also the following statements: "Because mainstream psychology is embedded in the dominant political, economic, and religious ideologies, professional psychologists have upheld these ideologies rather than examining their impact upon the lives of others" (Braginsky 1985, p. 881). "Because psychology seems to be unique among the social



sciences in its inability to reflect on its place in the social order, it will, in this unreflective stance, function as an apologist for the status quo" (E. V. Sullivan 1984, pp. 131-32).

What we are witnessing now is, an attempt by psychologists to awake up from the trance of their own unquestioning professionalism to a realization of who they are working for and what their real job is . . . and the answer is not, ultimately, to be found anywhere in their contracts, even in the small print. My hypothesis is that their unwritten contract is to maintain the status quo. (Ingleby 1974, p. 317)

Although some of these assertions are, in my view, justified in principle, they are not always accompanied by an exposition of the mechanisms involved in the utilization of psychology in the maintenance or reproduction of the prevalent social system. Explaining these mechanisms will be the main concern of the second part of the book.

The third critical remark concerning the current literature is of a more general nature and has to do with the social implications of a conformist psychology, particularly in view of the increasing authority attributed to the behavioral sciences in a wide array of issues. To wit:

Our services and advice are now sought and accepted in practically all fields of human activity. Newspapers describe the activities and opinions of psychologists on marriage, love, child rearing, and other aspects of day-to-day life. In the fields of marketing, personnel, training, selection, and more, executives rely on the advice and opinions of consulting psychologists. To state it bluntly, psychologists have considerable power to influence the opinions and behavior of the public. (Kipnis 1987, p. 30)

Or in the words of Koch (1980), "throughout this century (and before), psychology *has* been under gracious dissemination—whether in school, bar, office, or bedroom; whether by book, magazine, electronic propagation, or word of mouth—to a voracious consumership" (p. 33). Considering the popularity of psychological theories in the public forum, and the large number of children and adults consuming one type of psychological service or another provided by an army of school and clinical psychologists, family therapists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, industrial counselors, and the like, it is not difficult to realize the substantial impact psychology's message to conform might have upon

society as a whole. At best, it may be preventing changes that could enhance the well-being of the population. At worst, it may be silently endorsing unjust social practices.

Considering the late arrival of formal ethical education in the social sciences (Warwick 1980), we should not be surprised to notice that there are few guidelines for psychologists on how to face a pressing moral dilemma. Are psychologists supporting a social system that may not promote human welfare, by furnishing it with ideological ammunition? And if so, what should be done about it? The literature on this question has been characterized by denunciation more than announcement, in that there are many accusations but very few suggestions about how to face this moral dilemma. Sampson (1983) and E. V. Sullivan (1984), who have written eloquently about the ideological functions of psychology, speak of an *emancipatory* psychology that will not ratify the social order but facilitate the advent of greater freedom for those in disadvantaged positions. Similarly, some Marxist writers, such as C. I. Cohen (1986), Nahem (1981), and Seve (1978), conjecture about the use of psychology in bringing about macrosocial changes. Feminist psychologists appear to be the leaders in articulating political agendas for the discipline (Chesler 1989; Kitzinger 1991b; Unger and Crawford 1992; Wilkinson 1991). The nonconformist moral stance of these authors notwithstanding, an elaboration of daily practices that will avoid a purblind endorsement of prevailing power arrangements in society still needs to be developed. These issues will be addressed in the last section of the book, where the concepts of social and quotidian ethics are formulated.

Finally, a reading of the American and Canadian codes of ethics for psychologists reveals a lack of sensitivity to the question of ideological intrusions in our discipline. Although the Canadian code is much more definite than its American counterpart about the responsibility of psychologists toward society (as reflected in the statement that psychologists should "participate in the process of critical self-reflection of the discipline's place in society and in the development [of] . . . beneficial societal functioning and changes" [Canadian Psychological Association 1991, principle IV.5]), it does not provide specific guidelines as to how to advance this objective. In synthesis, the codes do not address the vulnerability of the discipline to ideological and political biases. Although this is not yet widely known, the Feminist Therapy Institute (1990) has developed a code that does address these imperfections. The degree of candor with which this code deals with issues of power differences, societal oppression, and potential victimization of

clients is quite unprecedented in documents of this kind. Unfortunately, the chasm separating this instrument from mainstream codes of ethics is as profound, or deeper, than the one segregating feminist discourse from traditional psychological theories.

This study will attempt to deal with the ethical shortcomings mentioned above, with the hope of providing a coherent argument as to the function of psychology in social reproduction. A comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted aspects involved in social reproduction or the maintenance of the status quo would necessitate an interdisciplinary approach with contributions from economics, political science, sociology, psychology, history, and philosophy, among others. The present study is intended to investigate only a small segment of the total machinery involved in social reproduction—that is, the messages to conform operating in psychological theories and practices.

The psychological formulations to be analyzed are those representative of Western views in the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on current practices. The incursion of ideology in psychology is not unique to any particular time within the suggested period. Although the *phenotypical* manifestations of conforming messages in psychology change with the times and with the particular school of thought, the *genotype* remains largely the same. I will argue that different psychological paradigms have been constituted by, and constitutive of, the prevalent ideology.

From a methodological point of view, it can be argued that the multitude of changes that have taken place in the Western world since the beginning of the century precludes the treatment of this period as a unit of historical analysis. I would claim, however, that the capitalist socioeconomic system, throughout its various phases, has always resorted to ideological means in order to legitimate its existence (Addams 1902; Giddens 1979; Silva 1970; H. T. Wilson 1977). Moreover, the fundamental values embraced by capitalism have basically remained the same in the period to be discussed (Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf 1986; George and Wilding 1976; Rand 1967; Sargent 1969; Webb and Webb 1923).

In general terms, this study is concerned with “the penetration of the social process into the intellectual sphere” (Mannheim 1936, p. 268), and more specifically with the role played by ideology in scientific knowledge (Abercrombie 1980; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Eriksson 1975; Mannheim 1936). The present analysis, which views ideas as being affected by, as well as affecting, the social order, is congruous with the dialectical sociology of knowledge advocated by Haru (1987), with the

feminist approach to the sociology of knowledge proposed by D. E. Smith (1990), and with the sociology of psychological knowledge endorsed by Buss (1975). Buss (1975) argues that the scholar and his or her "ideas, in part, both reflect and influence the underlying social structure" (p. 990). In more specific terms, this book advocates the scrutiny of psychological theories and practices by examining implicit ideological assumptions supportive of the status quo, with a view toward infusing into psychology a concern for the values of self-determination, distributive justice, democracy, and compassionate caring in interpersonal and public affairs.

The book is divided into three main sections. Part I, of which this introduction is the first chapter, presents the basic conceptual framework. This section develops and formulates the tools necessary to examine the social context of psychological discourse. Part II is an analysis of the morals and politics of psychological discourse, in its various manifestations. Part III deals with the social and ethical implications of psychology. This discipline is viewed as devoted, unconsciously perhaps, to fortifying a decadent state of social affairs. A moral framework for pursuing social change within psychology and the social sciences is also offered in part III.