

# Questioning the Presumption of Naturalism in the Social Sciences: A Case Study

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**Abstract** An important consensus has occurred across the social sciences: The best philosophy for guiding knowledge advancement omits any substantive reference to an active transcendent being. This philosophy of naturalism is so prevalent that social science disciplines renowned for examining research philosophies, such as anthropology, overlook naturalism. This article describes an anthropological case in point: E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study of the Azande people. Evans-Pritchard is noted for his thoughtful and thorough cultural studies, and the Azande are noted for their unorthodox, non-naturalistic beliefs. We describe the interaction of this anthropologist and culture and find that he presumes a reified naturalism, which dramatically affects his understanding and treatment of this non-naturalistic culture. We then proffer several lessons and implications for pastoral psychology and psychotherapy that follow from our case study.

**Keywords** Psychotherapy · Naturalism · Supernatural · Methodology · Assumptions

## Introduction

A fascinating consensus has occurred across a variety of disciplines—from the humanities to the sciences. It is the consensus that the best philosophy for guiding knowledge advancement omits any reference to an active transcendent being. Whether labeled “scientific naturalism” (Griffin 2000), “exclusive humanism” (Taylor 2004), or “methodological naturalism” (Bishop 2009), researchers and inquirers should *not* postulate or involve the supernatural when formulating hypotheses, designing modes of inquiry, or explaining data. This philosophy of naturalism, as we will call it here, is so prevalent that it is taken for granted. Because it is a by-product of the Enlightenment project, wherein one of the most important historical tasks was to separate medieval science from religion (Habermas 2008; Shweder 1984; Slife et al. 1999), naturalism

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is so taken for granted that even disciplines that pride themselves on examining their research assumptions frequently overlook it.

Disciplines have long varied in this pride. A brief review of psychology method texts and courses, for example, reveals little concern for research assumptions (Costa and Shimp 2011; cf. Slife and Williams 1995). However, there *is* such pride in disciplines like anthropology, where investigators have long realized how much their taken-for-granted assumptions affect their results. In fact, anthropologists routinely examine their research assumptions and train their investigators to be self-reflexive (Becker 1996; Davies 2002; Kral 2008).

As we will see, however, this pride does not always extend to the examination of naturalistic assumptions. The purpose of this article is to describe an anthropological case in point: the renowned anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard's (1976) famous study of the African tribe, the Azande. The Azande are noted for their unorthodox non-naturalistic beliefs, and Evans-Pritchard is noted for his thoughtful and thorough cultural studies (Bowie 2006). Our case study involves the interaction of the two, the culture and the anthropologist. We are specifically interested in whether this investigator presumes naturalism and how much this presumption might affect his understanding and treatment of this non-naturalistic culture. We then proffer several lessons and implications for psychology and psychotherapy that seem to result from our case study.

## The context of the case

As with any case study, its context is vital to a full understanding of its import. In this particular case, there are two such contexts, one *practical*, the context of the anthropologist and his study of the Azande, and one *intellectual*, the context of the scholarly discourse on naturalism.

### The practical context

First, there can be no doubt that the researcher of this case, Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, was and is a respected and renowned anthropological investigator; "known to his friends, colleagues, and students as 'E-P,' [he] was arguably the preeminent British social anthropologist of the 20th century" (Just 2012). Even the noted Clifford Geertz (1988) celebrated the anthropological "voice" of E-P in this passage: "Among those that have been significant in anthropology, that of the Oxbridge Senior Common Room is far and away the most important, and there has been no greater master of it than Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard: 'E-P'" (p. 49). Beidelman (1974) perhaps best sums up E-P's contribution to anthropology: "There are no topics from politics, kinship, and history to economics, religion, and folklore [to] which he did not make an important contribution" (p. 559).

There is also perhaps no doubt that Evans-Pritchard's most celebrated work (Evans-Pritchard 1976) is his book-length study of the central African tribe, the Azande. As Beidelman (1974) expresses it, "The Azande book is unquestionably the greatest single monograph ever written on African people and one of the truly great books in anthropology" (p. 560). Part of the reason for this celebrated and preeminent status is anthropology's emphasis on "studying culture from the actor's point of view" (Burton 1992, p. 140). As Burton (1992) put it:

This was one of the rallying cries that Malinowski professed as early as 1922. An identical concern prompted Evans-Pritchard to publish some 950 pages of Azande texts so that the reader could best appreciate, in an untainted fashion, how individuals in that society articulated their thoughts and reflections on topics such as death, sexuality, and causation. (p. 140)

In other words, E-P's work with the Azande continues to be celebrated by contemporary anthropologists as an exemplar of sensitive, thoughtful anthropological research (Bowie 2006).

This praise does not mean his work has not been criticized. E-P's study of the Azande is too prominent not to be widely discussed in contemporary anthropology. Our limited space, however, permits us to briefly sketch only two of the more prominent critical discussions here: his use of "English terms" and his favoring of Western science and rationality. Regarding the former, Gellner (1988) quotes Geertz in his critique of E-P: "This bringing of Africans into a world conceived in deeply English terms . . . [confirms] thereby the dominion of those terms" (p. 27). In other words, Geertz was considering how such terms could indicate a deep ethnocentricity in Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the Azande. Gellner (1988) appears to represent one point of view when he affirms Geertz's hypothesis: "Evans-Pritchard was, after all, ethnocentric, though only at a deep level" (p. 28). Geertz, however, did not view these terms as unduly ethnocentric, as in this passage: "[the dominion of those terms] must . . . not be misunderstood. It is not ethnocentric . . . it is not 'they are just like us' . . . [but] that their differences from us, however dramatic, do not, finally, count for much" (pp. 27–28).

As a second nexus of criticism and one more relevant to our own particular case, Bowie (2006) calls attention to Evans-Pritchard's penchant for asserting "his own Western, scientific outlook" (p. 14). Griefenhagen and Sherman (2008) appear to view this as problematic because "for Evans-Pritchard it was obvious that science produces true and objective knowledge" (p. 9). The issue here is that E-P is studying a nonscientific culture in the Azande. Was he therefore less open to the Azande in this regard? Griefenhagen and Sherman seem to answer this question in the affirmative, while other anthropologists appear to disagree. Bowie (2006), for example, argues that E-P was quite capable of understanding the nonscientific worldview of the Azande: "Evans-Pritchard did not simply dismiss the worldview of his Zande<sup>1</sup> informants as primitive or inferior. He allowed himself to be drawn into its logic and to reason from within Zande categories of thought" (p. 14). Bowie's perspective coincides nicely with Burton (1992), who viewed E-P as appreciating the Azande "in an untainted fashion" (p. 140), as noted above.

These types of criticisms have not diminished the stature of either Evans-Pritchard or his most celebrated cultural study. Indeed, as we have attempted to describe, these criticisms are frequently themselves countered within the anthropological community. Our point is that this cultural study, along with E-P's methods and modes of explanations, is not viewed as outmoded or anachronistic. It is rightly considered part of anthropology's proud present and thus one of the discipline's exemplar studies, despite or perhaps even because of its critiques. As we will see, however, the latter critique—the one concerning E-P's favoring of science—may itself be due to his favoring of "science's central dogma", the philosophy of naturalism, to which we now turn (Leahey 1991, p. 379).

### The intellectual context

The philosophy of naturalism is pivotal to our case study because it is so often viewed as integral to science in general and to the social sciences in particular. The philosopher of science David Ray Griffin (2000), for example, puts it this way in his book on scientific

<sup>1</sup> As Evans-Pritchard uses the term, Zande can be an adjective or refer to an individual, much as we use the term "American". Azande refers to the people as a whole, but it is also used as a plural adjective. For example, we would not say "Americans people", but "Azande people" is common usage.

naturalism: “Science, it is widely agreed in scientific, philosophical, and liberal religious circles, necessarily presupposes naturalism” (p. 11). Even the historian of social sciences Thomas Leahey (1991) considers naturalism to be “science’s central dogma” (p. 379), as we just noted.

Although these statements, we believe, may exaggerate the logical dependency of science on naturalism (cf. Plantinga 2011), there is little doubt that Griffin and Leahey are correct about how many researchers and commentators view that relationship. Yet, this view is only possible when the philosophy of naturalism is formally recognized or identified. In other words, to consider naturalism essential to science is to know *about* naturalism, to identify it *as* an underlying philosophy. As both Griffin and Leahey explain, however, naturalism is often so pervasive in science that it is more frequently a *presumption* of many researchers—implicit and unidentified—than it is a formally defended and personally endorsed “dogma”, to use Leahey’s term. For most researchers, naturalism is simply the way they have been trained to practice science, with an accompanying distaste and avoidance of all that might be considered non-naturalistic.

What specifically is this explicit and implicit naturalism? As mentioned in the [Introduction](#), this general philosophy or worldview is the conception that only natural events, as opposed to supernatural events, really matter. One of the most important implications of this general worldview relates to the understanding of knowledge advancement, especially scientific investigation: scientists should not assume the transcendent or the spiritual when formulating hypotheses, deciding modes of inquiry, or explaining data. In this regard, some scholars sharply distinguish methodological naturalism from metaphysical naturalism, as if the methodological conception is not a conception at all. Bishop (2009), for example, views methodological naturalism as an *activity* “focused on uncovering physical facts and regularities”, whereas metaphysical naturalism is a *conception* that “makes a substantive commitment to a picture of what really exists” (p. 108).

A number of observers, however, question this sharp distinction, viewing method activities as related to metaphysical commitments (e.g., Forrest 2000; Richardson et al. 1999; Slife and Williams 1995). These activities may not *be* the metaphysic, and thus are somewhat distinguishable from it, but this distinction does not mean the person engaging in the activities is not guided by a “substantive commitment to a picture” of the world, however implicitly this picture is held (Slife et al. 2012). In the case of methodological naturalists, why would they restrict their activities to natural events (Plantinga 2011)? This restriction is not arrived at randomly or revealed to us through “common sense” (Bishop 2009, p. 109) because, as we will see in our particular case study, even common sense can vary greatly from culture to culture.

This restriction of methodological activities is, instead, borne of a view of the world in which supernatural events, and perhaps the spiritual “methods” that might reveal them, are somehow unimportant to the naturalistic methods and events of interest. In other words, methodological naturalists presume a world in which supernatural events are not sufficiently important, even to the *natural* events of interest. Supernatural events, in this case, are presumed to be not only unimportant in themselves but also *separable from* the natural so that they do not need to be taken into account to fully understand the natural.

Needless to say, these methodological presumptions are substantive commitments to the metaphysic of naturalism. For this reason, and given the purposes of our study, we do not sharply distinguish methodological from metaphysical naturalism here, nor do we use the separating adjectival labels “methodological” and “metaphysical”. We are interested, instead, in the philosophy that unites them—the exclusive focus on and presumptive import of natural events.

## The Azande—the embodiment of supernaturalism

Perhaps the most important feature of the Azande culture, for the purposes of our case study, is that it embodies an understanding of non-naturalism, what we will call here *supernaturalism*. In this sense, we could just as easily have considered the interaction of anthropological researchers with the study of Western religious cultures (who also embrace the supernatural), but anthropologists have only recently turned to these Western supernatural cultures in the formal manner they have studied other cultures (e.g., Haynes and Robbins 2008). Our hypothesis with E-P's study of the supernatural culture of the Azande is that his hidden presumptions of Western naturalism would be exposed, even though he is the celebrated Western anthropologist who is "studying [Zande] culture from the actor's point of view" (Burton 1992, p. 140).

As Evans-Pritchard (1937/1976) describes in some detail, the supernaturalism of the Azande is witchcraft.<sup>2</sup> They do not just "believe in" witchcraft, as many Westerners might put it; they experience the necessity and "common sense" of witchcraft in understanding the world. Quoting Evans-Pritchard, "It plays its part in every activity of Zande life . . . forms the background of a vast panorama of oracles and magic; its influence is plainly stamped on law and morals, etiquette and religion" (p. 18). In fact, according to E-P, "There is no niche or corner of Zande culture into which [witchcraft] does not twist itself" (p. 18).

### Reified naturalism

As central as the supernatural obviously is to understanding the Azande, E-P is quite adamant that such witchcraft "clearly cannot exist" (p. 18). Here we are not so much interested in this clear contrast between the Azande bias toward supernaturalism and E-P's bias toward naturalism. We are more intrigued that Evans-Pritchard does not defend his naturalistic assertions, nor does he cite any evidence for the nonexistence of witchcraft. He seems to believe that he is stating a simple, concrete fact—witchcraft clearly cannot exist. Yet, we should note that *conventional science does not investigate the supernatural, let alone find evidence that it does not exist*. Its nonexistence is more presumed than proven.

It appears that E-P has implicitly reified this presumption. If he viewed naturalism merely as an investigator interpretation, he would know from his anthropological training that he should hold this belief tentatively or even skeptically, *especially* as it might be challenged by the culture he is attempting to understand (Kral 2008). As Glazier and Flowerday (2006) explain:

Anthropology suffers from a taboo against entering the religious experiences of our field hosts fully by (at least temporarily) accepting spiritual worldviews and explanations. . . . this attitude shields us from parts of the empirical reality that we are supposed to be documenting. (p. 111)

After all, how could E-P understand the Zande's *different* interpretation of reality when E-P does not understand his own alternative interpretation *qua* interpretation?

In this sense, Evans-Pritchard's reification makes it difficult to consider even the *possibility* of non-naturalism—the central reality of Zande life. In fact, there are interesting passages in Evans-Pritchard's famous book where he attempts to argue the Azande *out* of their beliefs. When a young boy, for instance, blames an unfortunate injury on witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard describes how he "always argued with the Azande and criticized their statements, and I did so

<sup>2</sup> Unless we specify otherwise, all quotes from Evans-Pritchard originate from his 1976 book on the Azande.

on this occasion” (p. 20). How should we take his “always” arguing with the Azande about their supernatural explanations? Does this sound like openness to understanding these explanations, with an awareness of his investigator interpretation that is held humbly? In fact, E-P never reports this awareness or this humility, leading some anthropologists to view this kind of favoring of Western scientific explanations as “conceptual imperialism” (Gellner 1988, p. 28).

E-P’s disbelief in Zande beliefs leads him not only to reject their beliefs but also to disrespect them. As E-P puts it, “I hope I am not expected to point out that the Zande cannot analyse his doctrines as I have done for him” (p. 23). E-P’s statement here could be interpreted as the simple assertion that the Azande are not Westerners. However, put in the context of the factual status of his naturalism, and thus the “nonexistence” of the Azande supernaturalism, this statement could mean that the centrality of witchcraft in Azande life indicates their inability to analyze their own doctrines. This borders dangerously (for the anthropologist) on an investigator position that says: Since you are not embracing the obvious factuality of my belief system, you may also be unable to critically analyze your own beliefs and experiences. After all, Evans-Pritchard views the Azande as engaging in “ready and stereotyped means of reacting” to events (p. 18), but E-P himself seems to take no notice of his own ready and stereotyped naturalistic responses.

Contrary to the assumptions of much contemporary secular scholarship, the notion that only natural events truly exist and have merit is not a neutral notion. As Porpora (2006) observes, if you *know* the supernatural cannot factually exist, it is difficult to fully understand, let alone respect, someone who sees it as a reality. “The reality of any supernatural object . . . is forever debarred from consideration” (Porpora 2006, p. 58). If, on the other hand, one desires to truly understand the other, in this case a culture with a bona fide supernatural experience of the world, then the supernatural has to be given some provisional authority, at least some effective credence: “If one thinks one has experienced God, then certainly one possible explanation of this experience is that God truly is there to be experienced (Alston 1991; Swinburne 1979)” (Porpora 2006, p. 61). There is no evidence, however, that E-P affords any such credence when attempting to understand the supernaturalism of the Zande culture. And this is apparently in sharp contrast to his celebrated understanding of the Azande in many other ways.

### Chance vs. purpose

Evans-Pritchard also struggles with other implications of his unrecognized naturalism. As a particularly striking example, he gives an intriguing account of a granary collapse that injures several Azande. He notes the Azande have no problem believing that termites could have eaten the granary’s support structure. They also have no problem believing that the injured people were originally drawn by the granary’s shade in seeking relief from the heat. There is nothing supernatural about either of these explanations. What Evans-Pritchard struggles with, given his naturalistic biases, is the desire of the Azande to seek *further* explanation. The Azande ask, according to E-P, “why should these *particular* people have been sitting under this *particular* granary at the *particular* moment when it collapsed” (emphasis added, p. 22)? In other words, why have the two causal chains—the granary collapsing and the people seeking shelter—intersected? What is the reason or purpose for my friends being injured in this particular way?

In response to these questions, Evans-Pritchard represents many Western secular and naturalistic thinkers when he seems to say: There *is* no “reason” or “purpose” for these injuries; they are merely an unfortunate coincidence of these causal chains. As Evans-Pritchard clarifies in this quote, “[Westerners] have no explanation of why the two chains

of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them” (p. 23). In other words, the naturalist can offer no substantive answer to the Zande question. At best, Evans-Pritchard is convinced that one can only say that chance or bad fortune brought these people and this collapse together. Something more than that is impossible.

Again, we see Evans-Pritchard’s reification of naturalism rearing its ugly head in his confidence, or perhaps arrogance, in these assertions. The last portion of the quote, “there is no interdependence between them”, is stated as fact. He appears not to be bothered that he brings no defense or evidence to bear in support of this supposed fact. He considers it obvious that he is right about the absence of this interdependence and the Azande are wrong even to ask the question of interdependence.

The Azande, however, are puzzled by this Western non-answer, from E-P’s own description. We characterize this Western response as a “non-answer” because Evans-Pritchard (representing the Westerner) provides no explanation in any conventional sense; chance or bad fortune is, at best, a semantic marker for the absence of explanation. Why, the Azande seem to ask, would the Westerner give up on explanation and meaning precisely when it is most needed—with the harm of loved ones? As Evans-Pritchard describes, it is *common sense* to the Azande that there *is* a purposeful meaning, a teleology (pp. 18–32), in the interdependence of these causal chains: it is the actions of witches. If there were no witchcraft, these two causal chains would not have intersected in this precise manner. The granary would not have collapsed when their friends were seeking shelter. The most important thing to be explained is not the seeking of shelter or the collapse of the granary, but the people who were hurt. Specifically, what is the *meaning* of this intersection? The inability of the Western naturalist to provide this explanation and describe this meaning is clear evidence for the Zande of the inadequacy of the Western naturalistic framework.

From the naturalistic perspective, of course, there can be no meaning or purpose in events such as these. If anything, the naturalist finds meaning in courageously braving the *absence* of such meaning. Anyone who finds some sort of supernatural meaning or purpose in such events is probably leaning on a supernatural crutch and cannot face the reality of the natural, and thus factual, world. From the worldview of the naturalist, the objective events of this intersection can be *given* subjective meaning (Reber and Slife *in press*), but the Zande notion that purpose is *inherent* in them is patently false. As noted, Evans-Pritchard is clear in this regard that such supernatural events “cannot exist” (p. 18) and that “there is no interdependence” (p. 23).

### Lessons of a cultural encounter

What are the lessons of this encounter between Evans-Pritchard and this non-naturalistic culture? We believe there are at least four: 1) the implicit power of naturalism in Western research, 2) the reification of this philosophy in the fact vs. belief distinction, 3) the hidden conceptual imperialism of Western naturalism, and 4) the ultimate purposelessness of a naturalistically understood world.

#### Lesson one

We believe that E-P is representative of a number of other Western researchers and practitioners in his ignorance of his own naturalistic assumptions. As described in the first section, naturalism is such a widely held philosophy in the advancement of knowledge that it

has become the methodological “air” the academy “breathes” (for exceptions, see Reber and Slife *in press*). Nor is the philosophy of naturalism a neutral tool of inquiry; it is an interpretive framework that is just as interpretive as other philosophies, including supernaturalism (Griffin 2000).

As Bartholomew (2000) put it, “Science is not a value-neutral enterprise that dispassionately applies universal scientific principles” (p. 1). It is, instead, an inevitably value-laden enterprise with values and philosophies that are often either not recognized in its practices or viewed as *nonvalues*. One lesson of this case study, we believe, is that naturalism is one of these unrecognized philosophies. When a renowned researcher, such as Evans-Pritchard, conducts an exemplar of anthropological investigation, such as the Azande study, and appears to ignore an entire system of his own beliefs, it is clear that the Western philosophy of naturalism is deeply ingrained and too frequently overlooked.

Remember, too, that anthropology is often viewed as the best of the social science disciplines in regard to its researcher self-reflexivity. Consider Barrett (2009) in this regard: “It probably can be claimed that anthropologists have a greater capacity than most people to hold their cultural backgrounds at bay; that is a central part of their training” (p. 22). Experience with varied cultures has led anthropologists to train their researchers not only in identifying their beliefs but also in holding them skeptically (Kral 2008). Otherwise, they know the cultures they study will likely be misunderstood. For Evans-Pritchard to miss his own Western naturalism, especially in light of it figuring so prominently in the reality of Zande culture, is—as an anthropologist colleague put it—“quite striking”, and a clear testament to the power of this philosophical system in the Western academy (J. Hickman, personal communication, April 25, 2012).

## Lesson two

The second lesson we can glean from Evans-Pritchard’s interaction with the Azande is the tendency to reify naturalism through the belief vs. fact distinction. In the West, beliefs are frequently considered more subjective, more arbitrary, and more disputable, whereas facts are more objective, less arbitrary, and less disputable. Evans-Pritchard represents the Western tendency to reify naturalistic beliefs, making them appear as if they are “out there” in the world as objective and assumption-free facts rather than features of an assumption-laden interpretive framework. Keesing et al. (1987) explain how problematic this tendency is for the anthropologist: “An anthropology . . . that reifies [cultures] into texts and objectifies their meanings, disguises and even mystifies the dynamics of knowledge and its use” (p. 161).

Naturalism’s association with Western science is surely part of the reason for this objectification, but this association does not make this philosophy of science any less philosophical. Indeed, naturalism could be considered every bit the *philosophy* that supernaturalism is, with its own subjective beliefs, assumptions, and values. Supernaturalism could also be said to have its own approaches to the advancement of knowledge, e.g., theological methods (Stivers 2003). If many Western scholars favor naturalism’s methods, their favoritism is based on cultural or philosophical bias, not the findings of investigations.

Indeed, the supernaturalism of the Azande was just as able to subsume and explain the data of their reality, as E-P so eloquently describes, as the naturalism of Evans-Pritchard was able to subsume and explain the data of his reality. Foster (1976) illustrates the viability of naturalism and supernaturalism in describing their respective explanations of a medical system:

a personalistic medical system . . . in which disease is explained as due to *the active purposeful intervention of an agent*, who may be human, nonhuman or supernatural or



*naturalistic systems* [that] *explain illness* . . . not from the machinations of an angry being, but rather from such *natural forces or conditions*. (p. 775)

The point here is that naturalism is not obviously superior. Naturalism is one of many explanatory frameworks. It is not a result or fact of research; it is a philosophy that guides much Western research.

### Lesson three

Evans-Pritchard's confounding of facts and beliefs implies a third cultural lesson—what the anthropologist Gellner (1988) calls “conceptual imperialism” (p. 28). The conceptual imperialism, in this case, was flagrant. E-P admits without apology his arguments with the Azande about the incorrectness of their supernaturalism. In other words, he explicitly and unabashedly attempted to persuade them to adopt his own concept of Western naturalism. While this persuasion could be considered merely an exchange of cultural views, E-P does not appear to understand that his own views in this regard *are* views. Moreover, E-P is not merely a tourist engaging the Azande in idle dialogue. He is an anthropologist conducting a significant study and quite aware of the cautions of imperialism and even colonialism. Consider Donnelly (2007) on this point: “The legacy of colonialism demands that Westerners show special caution and sensitivity when advancing arguments of universalism in the face of clashing cultural values” (p. 304).

We are aware that conceptual imperialism is more often linked to supernaturalists and labeled “proselytizing”. This link is due to the subjectification of supernaturalism (discussed above), making it appear more value-laden and thus more prone to accusations of value imposition or proselytizing. The proselytizing of naturalism, by contrast, is considered less likely because of its perceived objective status (Reber and Slife *in press*). Our case study, however, illustrates how *any* system of beliefs, including naturalism, can function in this proselytizing manner. Evans-Pritchard, in this case, was clearly invested, though he was not necessarily aware of this investment, in persuading the Azande to the truth of *his reality* as he “argued” and “criticized” them for their wrong beliefs and experiences (p. 20). There is no indication that he realized his persuasion was a kind of proselytizing of his Western beliefs among the Azande.

Perhaps more significantly, there is no indication E-P recognized that his proselytizing also included persuading the Azande to his naturalist understanding of “facts”—that *only* natural events were eligible to *be* facts. Part of this third lesson, then, is that restricting ourselves to natural events (naturalism) does not mean there are no facts *outside* this restriction. Just because scientists do not typically study supernatural forces does not mean that such forces do not exist and are not factual, especially if supernatural criteria are permitted to determine what is factual (e.g., see Davis 1989 on the “evidential force” of supernaturalism). Otherwise, we would have fact by philosophical fiat.

### Lesson four

The final lesson in our case study of E-P's encounter with the Azande involves how easily our Western and naturalistic line of thinking can devolve to a position of meaninglessness or nihilism. Recall that Evans-Pritchard could not bring himself to see purposeful meaning in the “two chains of causation”, the people seeking shelter and the granary collapsing. From E-P's perspective, there is no reason “why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them” (p. 23). This

intersection is obviously (to the Westerner) a chance or coincidental association; the coincidence of the two chains can have no inherent meaning. Natural events can be *given* purpose, from this Western naturalistic perspective, but they cannot *have* purpose. Consequently, any meaning that is provided has to be ultimately arbitrary (subjective), because the natural (objective) world itself has to be ultimately purposeless.

To Evans-Pritchard's credit, he explains clearly that this is not the experience of the Azande. Meaning is not ultimately arbitrary and the world is not ultimately purposeless. Needless to say, many Western religious people would agree with the Azande in this matter, even if they would not subscribe to the Zande brand of supernaturalism. Coincidences, for instance, are frequently understood as god-incidences from this Western religious perspective (Swinburne 1983, p. 390). Yet, it is easy to see how most of these religious Westerners are caught, to some degree or other, between the twin intellectual towers of theism and naturalism, without recognizing the clash that occurs between their respective pictures of a meaningful and meaningless world.

To make matters perhaps more puzzling for religious people, the scientists of the West often appear to be pointing to the "facts" of their naturalist philosophy. Evans-Pritchard may be representative of many Western scientists when he reifies the implications of his naturalistic philosophy as facts (e.g., witchcraft "clearly cannot exist", p. 18). Indeed, as celebrated as Western anthropology is in its vaunted research reflexivity, E-P may represent the Western anthropologist. Lohmann (2003) asks this question of anthropology explicitly: "Are supernatural worlds made up?" He then cites Lett (1997) as declaring, "Though many anthropologists are loath to admit it, we already know all religious beliefs to be false because they are not based on rationality or objectivity" (p. 178). With these kinds of "scientific" conclusions, many religious people of the West are likely struggling with the tension between naturalism and their theism.

Our case study also raises an important question: Could such Western anthropologists as Evans-Pritchard and Lett, not to mention a host of other Western academics, be unwittingly confounding their unidentified and unexamined philosophies of naturalism with what they consider "rationality or objectivity" (Lett 1997; Lohmann 2003)? After all, E-P's facts of naturalism are another way of endowing this philosophy with objectivity. Like Evans-Pritchard, most Western scientists may presume the objectivity of their naturalistic facts even though naturalism has actually *prevented* Western science from even *considering* the factuality of Azande beliefs, let alone *investigating* them. How, then, can such beliefs be viewed as "false", as Lett (1997) so confidently claims? Here the answer might be that naturalism has *become* rationality or objectivity. And if naturalism is rationality and objectivity, then the ultimate purposelessness of the world is reality, as Evans-Pritchard illustrates so clearly.

### Implications for psychotherapy

What relevance do these lessons have for psychotherapy generally and pastoral psychology more specifically? Although our case study is obviously limited by its particularity, we believe it raises important questions regarding the *training* of therapists as well as the *discounting* and *respecting* of religious clients. We do not try to develop complete answers to these questions here; we believe our case study is too limited. However, we do attempt to point to resources that might begin to address them.

#### Implication one—training

It is surely true that few of psychology's consumers believe in witches. Yet there is also no doubt that psychology's consumers are pervasively believers in the importance of *other*

supernatural beings in their daily lives (Richards and Bergin 2005). For this reason, we would argue that the attitude and conduct of Evans-Pritchard, an exemplary Western social science researcher, raises an interesting question for the psychotherapist: Does training in the social sciences, including psychology and perhaps even pastoral psychology, involve reified naturalism? Many of psychology's standard schools of psychotherapy as well as its techniques and strategies, are thoroughly naturalistic (Collins 1977; Richards and Bergin 2005; Slife et al. 2010). Further, and perhaps more importantly, these therapy approaches are rarely presented as naturalistic in psychology's mainstream texts and training regimens (Slife 2004). Just as E-P presented naturalism to the Azande, the naturalism of these approaches is presented as factual or as *the* way of understanding the world.

Even when therapists consider themselves "spiritual" or "theistic", as Slife et al. (2010) argue, naturalistic premises can still guide, however implicitly, the theories and techniques used in psychotherapy. This implicit guidance means that even pastoral psychologists, especially if they lack awareness of the naturalistic foundations of most contemporary psychotherapies, can unwittingly or unconsciously purvey naturalism or some unidentified syncretism of naturalism and theism in their therapeutic practices and explanations.

The ultimate purposelessness of a naturalistic world is worth noting in this regard. As E-P notes, there are many "intersections" of "causal chains" that simply have no purposeful relationship. Human teleology, where humans can formulate and act for the sake of their own purposes, is simply not part of a naturalistically understood world (Rychlak 1981, pp. 10–11, 26; Zubrin 2007). As the Oxford evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1995) put it, "the universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference" (p. 133). The implication here for psychotherapy is obvious—therapists and clients alike may assume that there is an absence of telic meaning in any number of therapeutic events and their everyday lives. If we add in the possibility that Western social scientists, analogous to E-P, depict such naturalistic implications as scientific facts, then the prestige of science can be overwhelming to those attempting to maintain their belief in a purpose-filled world.

We believe that trainers should consider raising the consciousness of their trainees on these issues. With some training in naturalism awareness, the psychotherapist can identify and examine naturalism with the client as it appears in the therapeutic moment. A vital part of this training is to alert students of therapy to the ways in which some forms of naturalism and secularism are viewed as having a neutral status in Western psychology. In other words, naturalism is frequently reified as the facts of the world and thus completely compatible with religious worldviews (Richards and Bergin 2005; Slife et al. 2012). From this perspective, naturalistic intervention strategies, along with naturalistic findings, are viewed as essentially compatible with either the theist or the atheist. Crucial, then, to an effective understanding of naturalism is to view it as a biased, culturally specific philosophy with a status not unlike many forms of supernaturalism and religion.

#### Implication two—discounting

When naturalism is (mistakenly) understood as neutral or unbiased as well as subsuming or universal, it is also likely to be viewed as trumping the biased and particular. We noted in our "lessons" discussion (above) that many forms of naturalism are considered more objective in this regard, while many forms of religion and supernaturalism are viewed as more subjective (cf. Reber and Slife *in press*). These views become particularly problematic when modernism, one of the reigning cultural philosophies of our age, casts the objective as clearly superior to the subjective (Searle 2008). We believe that this presumed superiority is the

reason E-P so confidently moved his belief in the nonexistence of witchcraft to the factual realm—his naturalistic belief was more objective than witchcraft.

The possibility of the comparative prestige of naturalism (in relation to non-naturalism) raises an interesting question for psychotherapists: Could the disciplinary institutionalization of this prestige lead to the explicit or implicit discounting of clients, especially those with religious beliefs? Most prominently in this regard, psychotherapists could favor naturalistic over non-naturalistic explanations through the course of psychotherapy, effectively discounting and talking clients out of their religious explanations. Just as E-P routinely attempted to argue the Azande out of their supernaturalism, psychotherapists could subtly persuade clients to an institutionalized “psychological” or “scientific” understanding of their problems. Few psychotherapists would engage in this sort of discounting deliberately or consciously, but what if few psychotherapists had identified or examined naturalism in the discipline (Implication One)? What if, as a related possibility, they assume that naturalism is more objective or more scientific than religious beliefs?

Clearly, the explanations and understandings that psychologists glean from their naturalistic research, which are transferred to their practices, are necessarily empty of supernatural considerations. This emptiness can mean to many therapists and clients that supernatural understandings of the world are either not real or not relevant to the problems at hand. Religious beliefs, in this sense, are perhaps relevant to the supernatural “compartment” of the clients’ lives but not to those compartments relevant to psychotherapy, a clear discounting or at least limiting of the clients’ religious beliefs without evidence or recognition of this discounting.

We believe that the only effective way to battle the prestige of naturalism, and thus the implicit and explicit discounting of religious beliefs in psychotherapy, is to develop credible *non-naturalistic* approaches to the social sciences. Although raising the consciousness of trainees about the philosophical, and thus “subjective”, status of naturalism will help to level the intellectual playing field (Implication One), we believe that science has too great a hold on the modern Western imagination to truly shake naturalism’s status as the more “objective” and thus the superior philosophy. Well-intentioned edicts (e.g., APA 2007) that admonish psychologists to understand and respect religious clients completely underestimate the institutionalized problems. The association of naturalism with science and scientific facts is simply too intimate and ingrained (Griffin 2000).

We believe, as an alternative, that more can be done to show how non-naturalistic approaches can themselves be scientific. We support, in this regard, the movement to conceptualize and investigate pastoral, spiritual, and even theistic psychotherapies (e.g., Johnson et al. 2010; Richards and Bergin 2005; Slife et al. 2010). However, until methodology itself is wrested from the grips of naturalism, the institutionalized discounting of non-naturalistic alternatives will continue. Here we believe that Plantinga (2011) is correct in the “overall claim” of his recent book: “There is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism” (p. ix).

Toward this end, the lead author (Slife) has participated in four special issues of journals that have begun to debate the possibility of a truly theistic approach to psychological methods, with actual theistic research being conducted and published (e.g., Reber and Slife *in press*; Reber et al. 2012; Slife and Reber 2009; Slife et al. 2012; Slife and Whoolery 2006). If such a theistic approach is possible, then naturalism can no longer be the “central dogma of science” and the institutionalized discounting of religion and those who subscribe to it would begin to be disrupted.

## Implication three—respecting

We are quite aware that many psychologists will protest our parallel between psychotherapy and Evans-Pritchard as an oversimplification. They might contend that they are generally respectful of client beliefs, so the “lessons” of this anthropologist simply do not apply to them. We believe, in contrast, that their contention is really an oversimplification, especially in view of the implicit and institutionalized nature of naturalism (Implications One and Two).

We believe that Evans-Pritchard, for example, would have protested our points in a similar manner, thinking that he was completely respectful of the Azande. Indeed, E-P is renowned in anthropology for just this respect, i.e., “studying culture from the actor’s point of view” (Burton 1992, p. 140). If anything, he was merely correcting a few “facts” about the world. However, as noted, there are no such “scientific facts” about Azande witchcraft because no scientist has investigated the factual status of these beliefs. For this reason, psychotherapists, as with anthropologists, have to guard constantly against *conceptual imperialism*—an implicit disrespect of their clients or participants—even in the face of what they consider the facts.

In this sense, we are less concerned with religion and the religious being discounted or put down (Implication Two). Here, we are more interested in the related but still separable question: Is it possible that attempts will be made to “convert” the religious to various forms of naturalism? Consider that psychotherapy’s history of respecting client values and beliefs is at best checkered in this regard. There is a large and long program of research indicating that many psychotherapists assume they “suspend” their values to respect their clients when, in fact, therapist values are really embedded in their conceptions of treatment and normality (Slife et al. 2003; Tjeltveit 1999). Paul Meehl (1959) is particularly noted for having realized this implication when he referred to psychotherapists as “crypto-missionaries” (p. 257).

Most psychotherapists consider themselves more open-minded than Meehl’s crypto-missionary label would seem to indicate. However, even so-called “open-minded” therapists, who are presumably especially open to client values, are notorious for not respecting close-minded clients (Slife et al. 2003). Moreover, those clients labeled “close-minded” are too frequently those with religious beliefs. Although the religious client can certainly *be* closed-minded, the issue here is the *presumption* of such closed-mindedness *because* they are religious. As the Evans-Pritchard case exemplifies, many naturalists presume the supernaturalist guilty of conceptual malfeasance before an understanding of the supernatural worldview is thoughtfully considered.

We believe there is a twofold approach to respecting clients in regard to these issues. The first, as described in Implications One and Two, is awareness, both therapist and disciplinary. Without the therapist’s identification of naturalism and the disciplinary development of non-naturalistic approaches to psychological science, we believe an analogue to E-P’s problems with the Azande will inevitably be recapitulated in therapy. If, on the other hand, the therapist is armed with self and disciplinary awareness of these issues, the second aspect of this twofold approach to respect is possible—informed consent. Clients must be informed, whether they subscribe to some type of naturalism or supernaturalism, about the therapist’s worldview. We believe that this simple and obviously ethical practice will change the disciplinary landscape. After all, most therapy clients do *not* endorse naturalism. Once these clients understand that many therapists, theories, and therapies presume naturalism, we believe the economics of the therapy situation will force the changes we are recommending.

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