The Ideology of Empiricism

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We congratulate Paul Watson (this issue) on his attempt to navigate the difficult research shoals of postmodernism in psychology. We support his efforts but want to call attention to a deeper issue concerning research and postmodernism—the philosophy of science, especially epistemology. We see Watson as rightly focused on the implications of postmodernism for methods, especially questionnaire type methods. His arguments and correctives regarding the biases or ideologies of these supposedly "objective" methods are helpful and cogent in our view. Our response, however, concerns less the ideologies of *methods* and more the ideologies of *methodologies*. We recognize that the terms "methods" and "methodologies" are sometimes considered synonymous in psychology. Still, we are making a fairly common distinction between the methods used and the methodologies (studies of methods) or philosophies that guide the use of these methods, including the empirical method itself (Creswell, 2003).

Our central concern is to extend, in a sense, the arguments of Watson to the methodological or philosophy of science level. He describes how the "subtle influences of ideology" can lead to "norms of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 24), even in scientific research. He demonstrates how certain research methods, considered by many researchers to "map" domains such as authoritarianism and intolerance in an unbiased fashion, are actually biased against or at least oversimplify Christian sensibilities. As he puts it so graphically, some research methods seem "almost designed to ideologically ambush Christians" (p. 24).

Philosophy of science. Our contribution to this discussion is to suggest that these hidden biases may also be operating in methods on the level of the philosophy of science. Watson hints at this other level when he points to the problems in using even "rational" methods. He is quite right that many postmodernists would deny the "neutrality" of such methods, citing inherent and implicit biases, depending on culture and context (Clegg & Slife, in press). What Watson does not mention explicitly, but seems to intimate in spots, is that this "myth of neutrality" can also be leveled at the empiricist. Empiricism is often used as a synonym for the objective or real, as in Watson's own use of "empirical realities" (p. 29). However, scientific empiricism is a particular epistemology or philosophy that undergirds and implicitly guides the researcher's actions as he or she formulates and conducts scientific investigations.

Empiricism, in this sense, is itself an ideology, with its own assumptions about knowledge and its own values about what is important. Indeed, the traditional (British) empiricism of quantitative methods is frequently defined as limiting knowledge and knowing to sensory experience exclusively (Curd & Cover, 1998; Slife & Williams, 1995). This restriction is, of course, the reason that traditional scientific methods have focused on observables almost exclusively. Indeed, it is the wide acceptance of this approach that has led to its lack of recognition as an ideology. For example, some researchers have assumed that this is the only "proven" method of science, yet there is no empirical evidence for the philosophy of empiricism. Even if we could scientifically compare empiricism with some other epistemology, which epistemology would we use to make the comparison?

Many researchers also do not view empiricism as a limitation of science. Along with many research methods texts, they consider empiricism to be synonymous with science, and thus assume that observables are all that can be known scientifically. Watson's (this issue) own language could be interpreted to have this implication: "empirical proof" (p. 6), "tested empirically" (p. 9), "empirical analysis" (p. 24), and "empirical realities" (p. 29). With this interpretation, empiricism is not considered one of the many possible ideologies of science; it is viewed as axiomatic of science.

We would argue that this view is false. After all, humans can experience and know all sorts of things that are *not* observable. Thoughts, feelings, many spiritual experiences, and even meanings and relationships are not strictly sensory experiences and do not fall on our retinas in the sense of vision and observability. The narrative of Genesis, for example, is experienced but not sensorily experienced. The printed words fall on our retinas, to be sure, but the relations among these words—their meanings—do not. Similarly, the individuals of interpersonal relationships fall on our retinas, but the relationship we form with these individuals—the "betweenness" of these individuals—is never observable. Of course, just because these unobservables are experienced and knowable in some sense does not mean that they are systematically or *scientifically* knowable. Still, many who advocate qualitative methods would claim that these types of meanings and relationships *can* be studied scientifically, but not with traditional empiricist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1988; Slife & Gantt, 1999).

If this is true, then traditional empiricism is not axiomatic, but is rather a kind of scientific ideology, with other possible philosophies of science available. Indeed, this

empiricism may contain a type of "ideological ambush," to use Watson's colorful phrase, for Christians who believe that there is more to life and knowledge than what can be experienced through the five senses. For example, this form of empiricism could deny the possibility of studying religious *un*observables, such as the meanings of the Holy Spirit or the relationships of agape love, even before investigation of these topics is attempted.

Operationalization. We acknowledge that many empiricists would claim that they do study unobservables through operationalizations. When some unobservable subject matter is of interest, such as attitudes, feelings, or spiritual experiences, empiricist epistemology requires that the psychological researcher "operationalize" and thus translate these unobservable constructs into observable procedures or operations. Researchers often assume that these operationalizations are direct manifestations of unobservables, such as the unobservable feelings of love manifesting observable hugs. Still, love can occur without hugs and hugs can occur without love, making their presumed connection (or any such operationalization) in no way necessary.

Perhaps more importantly from an empiricist's perspective, we cannot know, in principle, the relation between operationalizations and their constructs because these relationships and the constructs themselves are not observable (Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005). In this sense, the epistemology and its "ideological surround" still drive what is studied, because the unobservables of interest are never themselves *actually* studied; only their observable operationalizations are studied. In this sense, we have a discipline of operationalizations, with no empirically knowable connection to the

constructs of interest. Furthermore, this disciplinary state is not the result of the research itself; it is a result of a pre-investigatory, epistemological bias.

Science as ideology. Even in this operationalized sense, empiricism is still an ideology because it contains philosophical biases and selectively attends to only one portion of our experience. Most significantly for our purposes here, these biases and selectivity may undervalue or ignore experiences that are important to the Christian, such as meanings, spiritual experiences, and relationships. In the same sense that Watson advocates the evaluation of assessment instruments, we would advocate the evaluation of philosophies of science. We do not assume that empiricism is "bad" or wholly unfit for the psychology of religion (or Christianity, for that matter). However, we would argue that that this methodology of method is relatively overlooked and should be evaluated with Christian values and assumptions in mind.

For example, the assumptions associated with qualitative research methods (and methodology) may be more compatible with some Christian investigative questions. As mentioned, qualitative research is held to be a scientific way of studying unobservable meanings and relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Packer & Addison, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1988). Although qualitative research is itself sometimes characterized as "empirical," it typically does not maintain the same assumptions as traditional empiric*ism* (Slife & Gantt, 1999). Moveover, although qualitative researchers rely on a participant's experiences, they do not require nonsensory experiences to be translated and thus operationalized into sensory experiences.

We do not mean to advocate qualitative methods here. All methods will have their pros and cons, depending on a host of contextual considerations (Slife, in press).

Knowing these pros and cons will thus be crucial to correctly interpreting scientific data of all types. As the old saw goes, "just because you have only a hammer [the empirical method] doesn't mean that everything important [even in science] is a nail" or, we would add, can be operationalized as a "nail."

When combined with logical positivism, as empiricism often is in psychology, we have a complex combination of ideological values that one of us has delineated in several other publications (e.g., Slife, Wilson, & Judd, 2007; Slife, in press; Slife & Gantt, 1999). Indeed, an upcoming special issue of the journal, *Counseling and Values*, focuses specifically on "methodological values," comparing in many cases traditional quantitative values with qualitative values. Traditional quantitative methods, for example, include many "isms" or formal systems of values, such as objectivism (assuming that "bias is bad"), reductionism (reducing meanings to principles or laws), and materialism (presupposing that matter is what matters in science). However, these methods also include a host of related but less formal values, such as deciding methods before investigation, considering them fixed when conducting studies, and quantifying meanings.

Practical implications. These formal and informal method ideologies have very practical implications for the results that we find from these methods. As a pertinent example here, the questionnaire method that Watson discusses is guided and even limited by these values. For instance, questionnaire methods tend to assume that the quantification of meanings is necessary, whereas many qualitative methods assume that representing meanings with numbers is impoverished, if not misleading. In addition, many qualitative researchers would want to study meanings in the participants' "native or

lived language." In other words, qualitative researchers would assume that very few participants are skillful at "speaking" numbers, so asking participants to code complex meanings in numerical form is considered doubly problematic.

As Watson (this issue) also notes insightfully with regard to questionnaire methods, method values can be "theologies or anti-theologies in disguise" (Millbank, 1991, p. 3). For this reason, it is incumbent upon Christian researchers to examine the values of traditional scientific methods to discern their underlying theological assumptions. Do they, for instance, stack up well to the theistic assumptions of Christians? We would suggest in this regard that most empiricist/positivist philosophies of science also include reductive naturalistic assumptions that imply that no understanding of God is required to make sense of the world (Griffin, 2000; Slife & Whoolery, 2006). It is not merely coincidental, in this sense, that God or divine influence is not mentioned in research methods texts. Psychological research is thought to be conceivable and conductable without God or as if God plays no essential role.

Again, many psychological researchers may assume that the methodologies of science are neutral to theology—that "no essential role" is a kind of nonpartisanship. However, we would suggest that assuming God is not required for the formulation or conducting of research methods is not the same as, and certainly not neutral to, assuming that God *is* required for good and complete research activities. Perhaps it is controversial to assert that the latter assumption is at least implicitly presupposed by *all* Christians. Still, it is surely true that many Christians would presume a strong theism in this sense because they believe that divine influences are involved in the events that affect research.

If so, then many Christians may not agree with the naturalistic assumptions of the traditional philosophy of science.

If this is true, then several practical questions should be asked of psychological research and researchers. For example, are there research designs and/or study topics in which Christian sensibilities are "ambushed" in the sense implied by Watson? Do these designs, philosophies, or topics require "ideological translation," analogous to Watson's strategies, to another type of methodology? In many topics of meaning and spirituality, for instance, we would contend that some qualitative methodologies are more appropriate than some quantitative methodologies. Even if the assumptions of a particular system of methods are acceptable to many Christians, questions of how these values affect the findings would still need to be addressed.

Methodological pluralism. This type of methodological sophistication is part of the reason we would advocate what is sometimes called "methodological pluralism" (Roth, 1987; Slife & Gantt, 1999). We are aware that the term "pluralism" is often associated with the zeitgeist of postmodernism, especially in its many forms of relativism. However, the form of pluralism that we would favor is simply the notion that all method philosophies should be evaluated for the advantages and disadvantages they bring to a particular investigative question. Harkening back to the "hammer" metaphor, we would advocate a kind of Jamesian pragmatism that is perhaps best modeled by the successful carpenter. Hammers are helpful and even necessary when pounding nails, but screws are better handled by screwdrivers, and when cutting boards hammers are of almost no use at all.

Much as the recent APA Task Force on evidence-based practice recognized the need for a diversity of methods (APA, 2006), we would argue that a similar diversity of method*ologies* is important, particularly when we attempt to discern and investigate the unique subject matters associated with Christianity. We do not wish for our carpentry analogy to mislead anyone; important challenges await those who attempt a methodological pluralism. Nevertheless, ignoring the hidden ideologies that prompt these challenges does not make them go away. We agree with Watson as he concludes, "method cannot and should not escape ideology" (p. 28). We would only add that his conclusion applies to methodology as well.

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