

Psychology and Civil Liberties---Major Controversies

Some trends in mainstream psychology raise troubling questions about civil liberties. The dominant epistemology of contemporary psychology, set forth in all introductory texts, upholds a rigid positivist epistemology that reduces the human experience to atomistic behavior. The focus of this panel is on the consequences for civil liberties of this dominant psychological paradigm. Four psychologists from divergent traditions will discuss the civil liberties dangers hidden in the assumptions of contemporary psychology.

First, the codification of psychology as a natural science, as in the current STEM initiative, raises serious questions of academic freedom for investigators and practitioners who focus on engaging and understanding the experiencing subject.

Second, one may question whether such a reductionism infringes on the right of individuals to be treated in accordance with the norms of democracy. As Dewey said long ago, the methods used to train participants in a democracy concentrate on developing freedom of experience and thought process, and the latter on eradicating it. By failing to attend to the experiencing subject the field aligns itself with a psychology of manipulation more akin to authoritarian practices than a psychology of human experience in which respect for the person inheres. The question is then posed: Is not the elimination of the experiencing subject inherently anti-civil libertarian?

Third, the removal of the person from the social world cuts off psychological inquiry into the role of cultural practices and values, such as social inequalities, on the distress suffered by individuals and groups. Restrictions on freedom, equality, and justice are often consonant with depression, anxiety, and other psychological maladies, but such a connection must remain unseen by a psychology of monadic behavior. By neglecting the connection between human experience and social justice, the question is necessarily raised as to whether psychology has colluded with discriminatory and unequal societal values.

This panel will provide a depth exploration of the civil liberties issues raised by the dominant paradigm of contemporary psychology.