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Re-Sizing Psychology in Public Policy and the Private Imagination

by Mark Furlong

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Book review by Pamela Flattau, PhD

"Yet more myths and misconceptions"

"Apparently, mainstream psychology is in league with neo-liberal thinkers to protect its big business enterprise and prevent the development of interventions that would be more responsive to a definition of 'self' that was once the purview of 'psychology.' In this work of 'informed. . .conscious scholarship' (p. 2), *Re-Sizing Psychology in Public Policy and the Private Imagination*, Furlong aims to correct this problem through a technique that will produce 'a kind of orthoimage' of psychology for 'non-specialists' (p. 2). The author claims that 'The starting point of this text is that Psychology is not owned by psychologists . . . just as culture is not owned by anthropologists or society by sociologists' (p.2). Thus, the author aims to provide 'a different class of information' about psychology for use by policymakers, planners, and managers in health, community services, and education; offers arguments and points of view to undergraduates, graduates, and post-graduates that are 'perhaps to a degree revelatory'; and attempts to de-mystify the discipline within a 'larger social and ideological context' (p. 7) as a 'mainstream' coalition of interests 'salute' the flag of psychology to signal 'that the franchise is in good shape' (p. 303). Utilizing 'curated' galleries of eight 'thematically organized viewing spaces.' Furlong aims to offer an 'ortho-image' of psychology that will demonstrate that psychology is a rubric, not a science (p. 56), and calls for outsiders to 'take back what has been delegated' to the 'experts' (p. 304).

"Furlong's book is clearly *anti-psychology*, and it has been difficult to locate the right set of arguments *that might be drawn from outside mainstream psychology* that would persuade the author that his own 'outsider' arguments lack the full force of intellectual support. I have selected two areas overlooked by Furlong: (1) the professionalization of the field through its association with higher education, and (2.) the complex, global and open policy and planning networks."

The Culture of Expert Labor

"In buttressing his call for a broader definition of psychology, Furlong addresses the question 'What is psychology?' (p. 28). In response, the author offers a listing of candidate psychologies such as behavioral psychology, Christian psychology, cognitive psychology, critical psychology, and the like (p. 30); complains that scientific psychology has archived a 'whole body of thought. . .that is no longer respected or taught' (p. 38); suggests that mainstream psychology 'regards the psychoanalytic tradition as, at best, outdated, and, more often, as an embarrassment to psychology's status as a respectable science' (p. 45); and concludes that psychology is a rubric rather than a science (p. 56).

Furlong neglects to integrate the interesting history of the 'new' culture of professionalism that emerged in the nineteenth century (Bledstein, 1978) attaching psychology—among other fields—to the university for purposes of preparing the next generation of scholars and practitioners (Sokal, 1994). Perhaps at the heart of Furlong's lament is another historical fact that psychotherapy remains one of the contested jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988) when it comes to the division of expert labor in modern society.

"While Furlong cites the work of a number of interesting and important philosophers in his book, I cannot help but add that the author fails to note that certain other philosophers (Karl Popper, for example) reject certain 'schools of thought'—including psychotherapy—because their theoretical claims simply do not withstand testing (i.e. falsification) whether by the application of logic or through experimentation (Mason, 2008)."

Policy Collaboration in the Furtherance of the Human Condition

"Furlong promises to provide planners and policymakers with a 'different class' of information about psychology to bring attention to the need for a new definition of the 'self' in psychology and needed new interventions. Furlong offers a discussion of Foucault's ideas on governmentality (p. 212) and Hacking's observations about the pervasive use of statistics to define the 'self' (p. 213). Furlong then asserts that psychology has been complicit with neo-liberal ideology (p. 236) in generating a series of interventions at odds with 'a commitment to human rights, social justice, empowerment and the valuing of people's lived experience' (p.274).

"Of course these assertions have merit. However, when Furlong seemingly condemns psychology as a mainstream coalition eager to signal that the 'franchise' is in good shape (p. 303), his call to take back 'what has been delegated to these experts' (p. 304) rings hollow. Perhaps the author is looking in the wrong place when he seeks authoritative voices to speak on behalf of the missing 'self' in behavioral programs and practices. Could it be that Furlong is unaware—or chooses to ignore—multiplicity of efforts underway around the world to advance the health and welfare of individuals, including attention to cultural considerations?

"If numbers alone are any indication of the magnitude of these collaborative policy and planning efforts, consider that there are over 1,800 think tanks in the United States, a quarter of which are located in Washington DC. Many of these organizations comprise the social and behavioral sciences advisory network (Prewitt, Schwandt, & Straf, 2008, pp. 28–29). Psychologists working within this network—and those working through other networks such as the International Union of Psychological Science, the International Association of Applied Psychology, the United Nations, or the World Health Organization—each address contemporary challenges such as those identified by Furlong. Furthermore, if history is any signal of the future, high level policy leaders welcome the opportunity to end what has been described as "our hopeless method of making social policy decisions of the most sensitive sort on the basis of hunch, intuition, and good intentions" (Mondale, 1970, p. 504).

"Furlong admits that he is not a psychologist but a social worker (p. 17) and seemingly boasts in the Acknowledgments that 'Some of my best friends are not psychologists' (p. v). Nevertheless, Furlong's musings on the shortcomings of psychology in the world of policy and planning lack awareness of other 'outsider' observations that ascribe the situation to a division of labor and the possibility that some of the author's concerns are in fact being addressed through a network of professionals beyond those of so-called 'mainstream' psychology."

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