It is not Just Empowering: The Implications of Applying Psychological Reasoning in Explanations of Youth Crime

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Using findings from research, the author discusses the ways, in which concepts of psychology and risk have been used to understand youth crime since the birth of adolescence in the early 1900s. Although psychology is often applied to help and extend social understandings of youth, this knowledge has also allowed for the identification and control of deviant youth. This has led to young people being pathologised and marginalised by the adult society. There is a need for people to use psychological knowledge to have some understanding of the ways psychology can limit the understanding of youth deviance.

Keywords: psychology, youth-at-risk, deviance, adolescence

Introduction

Auguste Rodin’s sculpture, *The Thinker*, epitomises the pursuit for knowledge and wisdom in the Western world. In the sculpture, Dante is portrayed in a kneeling position contemplating concepts of being and life before the gates of Hades. As a mark of history, *The Thinker* symbolizes two periods of time—the classical Greece and the Western Enlightenment. In both of these periods of time, there has tended to be a focus on the good of knowledge. Knowledge has been associated with discovery, advancement, and empowerment. But there are some questions as the following:

1. Can knowledge really be limited to a definition found through deductive reasoning?
2. Is all knowledge good only because some knowledge is good?
3. Is there a need to be aware of the ways knowledge is used and the implications of knowledge when it is applied?

In this article, the author will argue that applying psychological knowledge in constructions of young people is a decision that has implications. It is the responsibility of researchers and practitioners to be consciously aware of these in their use of a presumed truth.

Although the reasoning provided by the author in this article comes from research that explores how writers in New Zealand institutions wrote about youth crime during the 2002 election year (Beals, 2006), the motivation for pursuing such a course in research came from the author’s own experiences as a child in a working-class sole parent family and as a student of education in undergraduate years. It was these experiences that led the author to understanding that knowledge is not all good and knowledge is often used in such a way that different groups of people are marginalised in different ways.

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The roots for this position come from an experience I had at secondary school, where a teacher used a common sense notion of risk factors to divide our class into two groups—those who would achieve and those who would drop-out of school. To do this, the teacher called out a series of factors, and then, he asked young people to stand if they had the following factors in their life: (a) parents, or parent, on a government benefit; (b) only one parent at home; (c) government assisted housing; (d) pervious experience with the police; and (e) living in the country regions outside the town. Surprisingly, this teacher was not interested in previous experiences at school. He implied that it was the out-of-school risk factors that led to drop-out from school, such as early pregnancy, criminal behaviour, and the dole cue (dependence on government assistance). This teacher was quick to ask the young people with risk factors in their life to consider truanting his class. He expressed his clear desire to spend his time teaching with the students he knew had a higher chance of success.

It was not until university that I found myself reflecting on this experience as I learnt about and examined psychological knowledge. The message I got at university (particularly in my undergraduate study to become a teacher) was that psychology was a good knowledge. It could be used by teachers and researchers to recognise and address problems, it could be used to empower, and it could allow people to achieve their potential in life.

Later, I was exposed to the works of Michel Foucault (1976; 1977), Nikolas Rose (1990; 1996), and their own critiques of psychology in Western societies. Foucault and Rose encouraged a questioning of psychology. They argued that psychology is a constructed truth, rather than being the truth. Psychology is a socially-constructed truth that Western thinkers use to understand ourselves and the world. They encouraged readers to see psychology as a truth not the truth. In other words, Foucault (1976; 1977) and Rose (1990; 1996) encouraged a recognition of the socially-constructed nature of knowledge and a further recognition that any application of knowledge is imbued with an application of power.

I took this understanding into my own research where I examined how writers and commentators in New Zealand used knowledge to construct and represent youth and crime in 2002 (Beals, 2006). I focused on this topic, because during 2001 and 2002, there were several extraordinary youth crimes that featured in the media and were the focus of debates in a national election. What I found in institutional texts was a construction of youth crimin als based in developmental knowledge and on an idea of risk factors. Young people were at risk, and a risk and developmental knowledge provided a tool to enable the control of youth deviance.

The application of knowledge has implications, even if a particular knowledge is used to help and assist young people. To thinkers, like Michael Apple (2001), any application of knowledge through the definitions we use has long-term consequences, which can be either positive or negative.

The ways adolescents are treated during their teenage years create tensions that last forever. Class, race, and gender identities are formed in interaction with institutions. If the definitions of youth that we build into our policies and programs in schools and elsewhere are as much a part of the problem as they are a part of a supposed solution, then we risk creating identities that will come back to haunt us for generations to come. (Apple, 2001, p. xi)

Hence, by looking closely at knowledge and the application of knowledge, it is evident that knowledge is not just used for empowerment and positive means. This is evident in Foucault’s (1980) remarks, “Knowledge and power are so intertwined that they cannot be separated—arguments for control are informed by knowledge and each time knowledge is exercised so is power.” For this reason, it is possible to move beyond conceptions of the good of knowledge to the techniques of control found within knowledge-informed practices.

In this article, the author will examine how a Western psychology of adolescence, since Granville Stanley Hall (1905) discovered it in the early 1900s, has not only provided an adult understanding of youth deviance, but also has provided the reasoning to control young people within institutions (e.g., schools). In this, there is something deeper going on, in which psychological knowledge has been used to place the blame for societal upheaval on the individual. That is, psychology has moved the focus of deviance from societal conditions and structures onto individual pathology and risk.
Why Have Knowledge?

A classical definition of knowledge would focus on the good of knowledge. It would argue that knowledge allows us to make life better and to make the lives of others better. However, knowledge is also used to understand oneself and one’s relation to the world. Without consciously realising this, psychological concepts and definitions are often drawn upon to achieve this. These concepts and definitions allow individuals and groups to understand who they are through situating themselves around a presumed norm and a differentiating themselves from others.

In a post-colonial sense, knowledge allows for a separation of us from others groups and people (Bhabha, 1986; Fanon, 1986; Butler, 1995; Mansfield, 2000). In a sense, we know who they are because of some presumed shared characteristics and these characteristics allow us to separate themselves from others in a society. This occurs through knowledge—a knowing of others. In a sense, knowledge allows the dominant (us) to assert some control over others (often called “them” in everyday discourse). Through developing knowledge, we (the dominant group) are able to determine others and affirm our position of power as the dominant group. We can then attempt to use knowledge to transform and control, or in other words, assimilate others. Although this use of knowledge is clearly evident in colonized countries (e.g., Aotearoa New Zealand), over a history of Western societies, it is possible to see this same use of knowledge in the construction of adolescence. Adults in adult-based institutions have constructed a knowledge of others (the adolescent) and have used this knowledge to position young people as becoming not-yet humans who need protection and control.

Take a Look at History

Storm and Stress

A history of child/youth psychology is closely connected to a history of Western society. Indeed, if looking back over the last 200 years, at times of structural change and instability, it shows that Western societies have tended to associate risk and deviance with young people and minority groups. Psychology was one knowledge that allowed for a definition of the problem and the discovery of solutions. Concepts of human risk (Castel, 1991) have also emerged alongside psychology and have been used to define and identify dangerous groups. Although concepts of risk predate the industrial revolution, during the beginning of industrial society in Europe and America, people started to associate risk with dangerous populations rather than feats of adventure and dare (Douglas, 1992).

During the industrial revolution in the late 1700s and early 1800s, changes in the structure of emerging industrial societies in the West were also reflected in changes to the types of crimes being committed. Before the industrial revolution began across European countries, individuals tended to live in families on self-sufficient farms in rural areas. Children in these families were merely small adults as they performed the functions of adults and contributed to the family (Aries, 1962). The industrial revolution heralded a change in the function and composition of families. The movement of families into industrialised work in urban centres was a precursor to the emergence of a class structure. In order to survive, many working-class families required their children to still perform the function of small adults, but the industrial environment of these new workplaces led to the exploitation of child labour.

It is during the beginning of the industrial revolution that psychology began to emerge as an intellectual tool in the West to define and enable the control of deviant young people, particularly working-class children.
This occurred with the onset of the philanthropic movement to move young children out of the workplace and into schools (Donzelot, 1979). Up until the 1800s, child labour was not seen as a problem by those governing in pre-industrial societies, surprisingly it only became a problem when childhood began to emerge as a concept in psychology (Aries, 1962). By the 1800s, psychology provided the middle-class population with a tool to aid in the betterment of the working-class population and their children. Through using psychological reasoning of developmental difference, middle-class women, in particular, advocated for the elimination of child labour and for the placement of children into schools and other educational institutions (Donzelot, 1979). Through using psychology, the middle-class population was able to help the working-class population. However, there was also another edge to psychology that of control.

In Western industrial societies, increased urbanisation coincided with a supposed increase in crime (Pratt, 1997). In particular, due to privatisation, there was a recorded increase in property crime with more and more working-class adult males and young people committing crime to make ends meet. The advent of population statistics allowed the governing middle-class to associate risk with the working-class population (Pratt, 1997). The advent of psychology and mass education allowed the risk to be countered, because working-class children taken out of the workplace and off the urban streets and placed in the school yard, where they could be controlled through socialisation and the supervision of adult teachers (Donzelot, 1979).

Moving forward in history to the late 1800s and early 1900s, it shows the same pattern emerging when an economic depression in many Western countries led to social instability. Alongside these changes, there was a rise in deviance particularly by young people who, in effect, were sandwiched between the end of compulsory schooling (due to age) and the beginning of working life. The popularity of eugenics saw governing populations in industrial society attribute deviance and/or pathology to minority groups in society (women, ethnic groups, and working-class people). Within psychology, Granville Stanley Hall (1905) discovered a new developmental period, which he called adolescence. Rather than associating deviance with the structural changes in society, Hall (1905) associated adolescent deviance with an inner turmoil he labeled “storm and stress” (p. xiii). Across the industrial world, a response was the development of high school or secondary school as a mechanism to keep deviant youth off the street and to socialize them into workers.

Nothing but an Identity Crisis

By the middle 20th century, psychology was further used in the West to separate youth from adults and provide some reasoning for the control of young people. Post-war (1940s) saw many industrial countries experiencing economic stability alongside changes in the structure of society and technology. Industrial societies transformed into market economies and technology led to many different forms of entertainment. Young people were, perhaps, one of the first groups to take hold of the new opportunities found within the changing structure of society and their increased participation was interpreted by many adults as deviance. While adults did not draw upon a knowledge of risk to describe the behaviours of these youth, they did draw upon psychological knowledge to link the behaviours of young people with an assumed lack and need to develop into adults. Perhaps, the most well known theory of this time was Eric Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity development. Through Erikson’s theory, adult society was able to associate the deviant behaviours of young people with their developmental lack of adult autonomy. Again, responses across industrial countries to adult concerns of the youth trapped in an identity crisis was to look at increasing the school leaving age to keep youth in education and enable positive socialization.
Most recently, from the 1970s onwards, it is evident that Western researchers of psychology focused on the development of young people began to bring together ideas of risk with a knowledge of development. This directly reflected the changes in contemporary industrial societies during the 1970s. In the 1970s, the industrial world faced several challenges: (a) the threat of the Vietnam War; (b) the fall of welfarism; and (c) an oil crisis. Alongside these challenges, the rise in neo-liberalism reconceptualised risk (Beck, 1992). Contemporary industrial societies began to associate risk with insurance, probability, and the control of the future within the present moment. Those concerned with the young people brought together risk and psychology to talk about the youth-at-risk, risk factors, potential outcomes, and early intervention (Castel, 1991). Risk psychology performed the same function of adolescent psychology in the early 1900s. It allowed adults to differentiate youth from themselves, it allowed adults to define youth, and it allowed adults the reasoning needed to control young people. Most of the time when these knowledges arose, people were not solely concerned with control. But looking more closely at the types of theories, from which these knowledges developed, it is possible to see an aspect of control where not just the deviance of all young people was controlled, but also the positioning of particular minority groups of youth as a deficit and/or pathological was maintained.

Defining and Controlling Through Knowledge: Hall’s theory

Hall’s (1905) theory of adolescent development serves as a good example of a Western theory that positions young people as problematic while also positioning minority groups of youth as deficit. Although Hall’s theory is now dated, by looking closely at his theory and the types of psychological reasoning that are used today, it is possible to see the ways the same forms of marginalisation and control of youth are continuing. His theory still echoes in both academic and common sense ideas.

Hall (1905) combined recapitulation theory with evolutionary theory to describe what he was observing in the depression of the late 1890s and the delinquent behaviour of youth as a biological problem within all adolescents. Recapitulation saw civilisation and colonisation as a tree of development with the less civilised races at the base of the tree and the Caucasian race at the top. Those applying this theory used it to argue for the assimilation of colonised races. The idea being that if the uncivilised races were exposed to civilised ways and ideas, then they would or rather should develop up the tree to a more civilised position. When thinkers combined this theory with evolutionary theory, they argued that those races who lacked the ability to civilise would simply die off whilst the Caucasian race would survive—a survival of the fittest scenario.

Hall (1905) took these ideas and reapplied them to the development of an individual. He connected childhood at the base of the tree (the uncivilised) and adulthood at the top (the civilised), “The child comes from and harks back to a remoter past and the adolescent is neo-atavistic. For him/her, the later acquisitions of the race slowly become prepotent” (Hall, 1905, p. xiii).

Now, this may now be seen as an implausible connection, but Hall (1905) took a logical step at the time he was writing, because he was using the colonial ideas that circulated around Western industrial at that time. In colonial reasoning, to be uncivilised in the 1800s meant one was not connected to the technological developments of industrial society. The same type of thinking was applied to young people. Using romanticised notions of childhood, industrial thinkers connected childhood to nature and playful development. Drawing upon Rousseau’s philosophical thinking, they connected adulthood with civilisation and childhood with nature (Hendrick, 1990).

Using recapitulation theory, colonial theorists described the in-between of uncivilised and civilised as a turbulent time of upheaval and change as races left behind their uncivilised ways and strived to become
civilised. Hall (1905) transferred this turbulent time directly to adolescence and the in-between time of childhood and adulthood was a time of upheaval and inner turmoil to Hall. Although this might have seemed a logical and scientifically relevant step (particularly in 1905), as Nancy Lesko (2001) pointed out, Hall’s theory was not without consequences.

Lesko (2001) argued that Hall’s theory had two implications:

1. Hall’s theory enabled Western adult society to group all young people as adolescents different to themselves and it further allowed adults a reasoning to control young people.

2. Hall’s theory trapped youth from minority cultures and groups within the uncivilised or in-between position.

To Lesko (2001), recapitulation theory was and still is problematic, because minority groups can never reach the position of civilised—some of them remain trapped in childhood and never really leave it behind.

Indeed, by looking at the commentaries coming out in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2002 about youth crime, this very thing was still evident when writers described the youth-at-risk as never really reaching adulthood. Instead, these young people were trapped by and in the risk factors of their childhood. In the following extract from a feature article from 2002, the author conveys the opinion of New Zealand’s children’s commissioner. Diane Dekker (2002) noted that the possible reasons for a 12-year-old’s deviant behaviour stems back to a possible experience of “foetal alcohol syndrome.” The 12-year-old killer is not portrayed as an adolescent criminal, but as a young person trapped in childhood conditions. For example, he might be suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome (Dekker, 2002, p. 1), he wonders,

Children’s commissioner Roger McClay said the majority of children are just as well-behaved as in any other generation, but there are a lot more hurdles for the vulnerable, such as drugs and alcohol, family breakup, a diet of media violence, even accidents of birth, with babies born earlier, and often needing more care and special education.

However, using Hall (1905) as an example of youth knowledge, which may marginalise youth could be seen as a problematic argument, particularly because recapitulation theory is no longer used to describe society and, in many contemporary industrial societies, there has be recognition that practices of assimilation are problematic. Writers, such as Lesko (2001) would argue that Hall’s theory is still very relevant for Western thinking about young people today as many of Hall’s concepts continue to reverberant in societal understandings of adolescence. Furthermore, if we look closely at the combination of risk and psychological knowledge today, we can see a similar form of marginalisation occurring.

**Defining and Controlling Through Knowledge: It is Still Happening**

**Replacing the Tree With a Curve**

Recapitulation theory is no longer used and regarded as the truth of society. Instead experts of youth deviance tend to turn to the objective and impartial knowledge of psychology. So, folklore or myths are no longer used to explain societal groups, but instead, there is a turn to scientific reason and truth. When psychological knowledge is used to define different groups of people, there is a tendency to confine these groups within a psychological definition. In a way, the current combination of psychological knowledge and risk appears to reinforce Hall’s (1905) ideas that all youth are problematic and that some youth are more problematic than others. In effect, when psychological knowledge is used alongside ideas of risk there is still a risk of marginalising all young people and permanently marginalising minority groups of youth.
Now, theories of development are not informed by metaphoric trees. The tree of civilised distribution in the West has been replaced by the bell-shape curve of normal distribution defined by a Western idea of normal. Theorists using the bell-shape curve argue that the human population can be distributed across an even curve with a norm in the middle. Using the curve and related statistics to place people into the curve, they argue that the majority of people fall around the norm while a small group of individuals surround the extremes of the norm. The curve is usually used, somewhat problematically, in intelligence research, but researchers also use the curve in many statistical analyses of pathology and abnormality. That is, in any statistical analysis of co-relation, the underlying statistical tools are based on an analysis of distribution and a concept that human statistics will be distributed around a norm. Although statistical analysis using the bell-shape curve or other curves of distribution is useful for the understanding of a phenomenon, there is a need to recognise that whenever these analyses are used and there is an assumption that not everybody is normal and some people must be abnormal or deficit in particular ways. Now, ideas of human normality and abnormality have become so ingrained in the collective psyche of the West that we tend to compare and associate ourselves and others through these ideas without recognising the impossibility of absolute normality (Rose, 1996).

**It is All About Risk**

When writers and commentators apply these ideas of normality and abnormality to young people, they tend to focus on the abnormal youth-at-risk and the risk factors, which signify the difference of this youth compared to normal youth. The types of risk factors these writers draw upon relate to age, intelligence, psychological well-being, family composition, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. For many researchers and policy-makers, statistics allow them to explore the distribution and accumulation of risk factors in population groups.

Like Hall’s theory, when adults apply risk factors to young people to describe and discuss youth deviance, to a certain extent, they marginalise all young people through references to age and vulnerability. That is, adults assume all young people to be vulnerable due to age. Also, reflecting Hall’s theory, they marginalise specific groups of young people, particularly, youth from families that diverge from the nuclear family model, or live in working-class conditions, and youth from ethnic minority groups. All of these young people are seen as being more likely to commit crime and have problematic outcomes and their differences to other normal youth are reinterpreted as risk factors.

Risk factors allow practitioners to identify individuals and families divergent from the norm. The following extract from an academic journal article about New Zealand’s Christchurch Health and Development study illustrates the types of risk factors associated with criminal deviance. In this article, Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, and Horwood (2002) argued that family factors, socio-economic factors, and experiences in the education system are associated with criminal deviance. In doing this, the writers associate deviance with individual and familial pathology while failing to acknowledge the social issues that may lead to these factors, such as the ways in which neo-liberal societies and institutions are structured. An interesting feature, illustrated in this article, but also common to risk factor terminology is the displacement of references to working-class conditions into a more refined terminology—lower socio-economic factors. By doing this, advocates of risk factors subtly ignore the structural class-based inequalities of many Western countries.

Results revealed that those who left school without qualifications were more likely to have had a young mother, who had no school qualification, belong to families characterised by low socio-economic status, and below average living
standards. The child’s parents were more likely to have used illicit substances to have alcohol problems, such as smoking and participating in criminal offending. At the age of 15 years, the children had poorer attachment to these parents.

The young people who left school without qualifications were also more likely to have low intelligence quotient (IQ) scores at the age of eight years and low Test of Scholastic Abilities (TOSCA) scores at the age of 13 years. They had higher truancy levels, greater risks of early conduct problems, school suspensions and were more likely to have associated with deviant peers. They were also more likely to be smoking at 15-year-old, have low self-esteem and high neuroticism scores. Those who left school without qualifications were also slightly more likely to be males. (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood 2002, p. 47)

What About Ethnicity

Reflecting the discrimination of minority ethnic groups in Hall’s (1905) theory, the way risk factors are used also discriminates against ethnic minorities. For example, during the focus on crime in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2002, writers, like Chris Mirams (2002), in the following extract from a media feature article, did not explicitly label ethnicity as a risk factor, but instead note that the disproportionate representation of ethnic minority youth in youth justice statistics describes the intensive forms of interventions available that target ethnic minority youth.

Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, are disproportionately represented in youth crime figures. According to the Government’s Youth Offending Strategy, released in April, Maori make up about half of all youths apprehended by the police. In some economically deprived areas, it can make up 90% of those appearing before the Youth Court. Through the Te Rakau Trust, actor Jim Moriarty has spent a decade using drama as a way to break through to Maori and other troubled youth. His Island Bay-based Theatre Marae project has performed to more than a million people in schools, remand centres, prisons, and at-risk communities. (Mirams, 2002, p. 5)

In another 2002 publication, the writer noted that the disproportionate offending by ethnic minority groups, and then, quickly attribute that offending to “social deprivation” (Maxwell & Morris, 2002, p. 204). In doing this, researchers using risk psychology do not explicitly attribute risk with ethnicity, but displace the reasons for offending on other factors. In effect, it is as if Hall’s initial ideas of adolescence and race have so entrenched Western social understandings of normal and difference. Within risk psychology, it is assumed commonsense that there are ethnic differences while the historical structure of psychology, which positions the Caucasian ethnicity as the norm and a point of reference is ignored. Perhaps, for reasons of political correctness, practices involving risk psychology imply that ethnicity is a risk factor, but avoid falling into the trap of saying that ethnic minorities pose a higher risk.

Surely not Gender

There is also a form of double discrimination that occurs where some youth are denied a position of deviance or whose deviance is seen as doubly problematic. This is evident in discussions of gender, when being male is considered a risk factor to criminal deviance, whereas being a female is considered a protective factor (something that will protect them from deviant outcomes). When commentators talk about the deviance of young women in the West, they tend to see it as problematic and a dangerous indicator. For example, in the following extract from a New Zealand government policy document, the writers directly associate gender with crime by arguing that being female is a protective factor, which is a factor that reduces the likelihood of pathological outcomes. However, the writers also express a concern with the out-of-character female offending by implying that the offending by females is more pathological and of deeper concern for adult society. Again, it is possible to see Hall’s (1905) original ideas reflected as he found that females were not naturally criminally
deviant, but instead, any feminine deviance was a reflection of hysteria and madness.

Being female is a significant protective factor. Notwithstanding, concern has been expressed, particularly by practitioners, such as the police that offending by young females is becoming more serious and violent. (Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Social Development, 2002, p. 12)

Using this reasoning, it is possible to presume that young people from “normal” families who continue become adult criminals also receive a certain amount of double discrimination. Although this is not reflected in the Aotearoa New Zealand data of institutional texts, it is possible to infer that this is happening by looking at the focus of interventions, and in particular, early intervention. Intervention requires a certain amount of targeting and assessment. When it comes to youth-at-risk in New Zealand, it is often the young Maori male from a lower socio-economic family that is identified and targeted. It is through interventions that the most detrimental effect of using a psychological knowledge risk factors becomes apparent.

Controlling the Youth-at-Risk: Interventions Into Youth Deviance

By looking at the focus of interventions within Western risk psychology, we can see that those advocating for interventions tend to focus on early intervention. There is an idea that if practitioners and professionals intervene early in a young person’s life, then the young person’s destiny and potentiality can be controlled. However, there is much debate over the most appropriate age for intervention. Some advocates argue that the age of 10 years is the maximum age for early intervention (Farrington, 1997), while others argue that the age of five is the maximum age (Dussuyer, 2002). In Aotearoa New Zealand, commentators and policy-makers have argued that high-risk children should be identified before they are born (Campbell, 2006). The argument these commentators propose is that professionals should and can use a knowledge of risk factors, such as age of mother, family composition (absence of a father figure), and lower socio-economic status, to identify, separate, and target high-risk youth. In effect, through using risk psychology, commentators and professionals label or position particular groups as deviant based on ascribed characteristics (Beck 1992). They portray young people as having limited, or no, agency to resist deviance and determine their own destiny.

Although, it is possible and to a certain extent accurate, to argue that advocates of early intervention are using knowledge for the good of high-risk young people and their families, the reality should not be dismissed that part of the motivation for early intervention concerns the control of young people and their families. When commentators and practitioners apply risk psychology in early intervention, they tend to use a knowledge of others—a knowledge that defines, situates, and divides others from mainstream groups in society. There is an inherent expectation that others should aspire to the mainstream, but like in Hall’s (1905) theory, others can never fully integrate into the mainstream and others will always be others and, in their position as others, they will always be challenging the mainstream norm in society.

When people apply risk psychology in early intervention in arguing for the good of knowledge and of society, they tend to ignore the impossibility of an absolute norm, in which everyone can fit. The lingo of socio-economic factors in risk psychology is a good example of this. Advocates for risk psychology and early intervention in the West claim that socio-economic status is a clear risk factor leading to criminal outcomes. They argue that interventions should use educational programmes to enable upward mobility. To these people, if we can eliminate socio-economic status, then we will have a dramatic impact on youth offending. However, this is a problematic focus, particularly in neo-liberal societies like New Zealand. Neo-liberal societies depend
upon a differential pay system where those working in service jobs are paid less than those in professional jobs. To focus on socio-economic status would require the ways neo-liberal societies are constructed to be addressed. There would be a need to acknowledge the importance and place of service professions, while finding a way to ensure that those in these jobs earn the same amount of money as those in professional jobs. However, as shown in history, such societies are reluctant to restructure the economic foundations of capitalism, on which neo-liberalism is based. In effect, it could be assumed that middle-class groups in society would be reluctant to have working-class labourers paid on equal terms. The middle-class position might be the norm, but it can never be an absolute norm, in which all groups aspire and have equal changes.

What is evident here is that, when a social group uses knowledge to control, they do not so much use knowledge to control deviance, but rather, use knowledge to control the positions that the other can occupy. In effect, mainstream groups in the West use knowledge to reaffirm their position and to reposition others as deviant or different. As adolescents, popular psychological discourse constructs these young people as naturally naughty and inherently deviant. The adolescent deviant is able to grow out of their deviance in adulthood and lead a normal life. However, if the young person is from non-mainstream groups, and due to their positioning manifests risk factors, risk psychology constructs them as abnormal. The youth-at-risk who is powerless cannot determine their own futures and needs control to guide them into normality.

Being positioned as a youth-at-risk is not helpful for a young person. When adult society positions them through risk, the youth is trapped into a destiny and expectation. Adult mainstream society no longer sees them as human beings with choice and the ability to resist (outcomes/risk factors or even mainstream society itself), but as objects of risk and effects of the risk factors in their own lives.

The Effects of Risk Psychology

When people use risk psychology to describe young deviants, there is a tendency to assume an inherent helplessness in the impact interventions can have on young people. Unintentionally, by using risk psychology, people may find themselves thinking that nothing can be done to help the young person. In effect, those using psychology may find that the amount and intensity of risk factors in a young person’s life are to such an extent that no intervention can make a difference. Indeed, this was apparent in 2002 in New Zealand, where researchers and policy-makers (Ministry of Justice, 2002) were examining the death of Micheal Choy by a group of youths in Auckland and concluded that the presence of risk factors in the youth people’s lives was to such an extent that agencies could only attempt to cautiously predict outcomes and would have limited effect in controlling the “destiny” of the young people involved. The writers concluded that the only intervention that would work was an intervention applied in the youths’ lives at a much earlier time in their lives that specifically targeted and addressed risk factors.

Despite its problems, early intervention can and does work for some people, but the reality is that early intervention does not work for all young people. Early intervention should not be eliminated totally, but instead there is a need to acknowledge the implications of early intervention and be critical about its use. Although there is a vast quantity of research that endorses early intervention, there is a lack of longitudinal research into the long-term effects of early intervention. In one of the first early interventions—the Cambridge-Somerville intervention, which did include longitudinal follow-up, researchers (e.g., McCord, 2002) found that participants in the early intervention were more likely to be incarcerated later on in life. Other theorists (e.g., White, 2002)
had argued that early intervention can alienate some young people through ascribed characteristics. These theorists argue that risk factors actually reflect structural inequalities in Western societies and consequently target particular groups of youth.

Western risk psychology, to a certain extent, puts the shutters over the eyes of researchers and practitioners as there is an expectation that it will work because of an assumption that it does work. But does it really? If all the young people with risk factors in their lives were identified and then the young people who actually progressed into life-long deviance were separated out of this group, there would be a need to acknowledge that risk factors do not necessarily cause deviance only that young people who are deviant have risk factors in their life. Indeed, this reality was acknowledged by those who writing about youth crime in New Zealand in 2002. However, to them, the benefits outweighed the costs.

Negative experiences in early childhood do not affect everyone in the same way. That someone is at risk of poor outcomes does not necessarily mean that poor outcomes will eventuate. Some children may grow up in relatively deprived circumstances but go on to lead productive lives. Others may grow up in stable and positive environments but experience poor outcomes in adulthood.

Interventions are most likely to be successful and effective if they occur before problem behaviours become entrenched. It is true, however, that early interventions are also less likely to be efficient. Inevitably, more people will receive assistance than actually require it to prevent later poor outcomes. The extent of intervention may also be greater than what is required. There are always trade-offs to be made, therefore, between the effectiveness of early interventions and the efficiency of later interventions.

Notwithstanding, early intervention initiatives can be seen as an investment by government and society to avoid the significantly higher costs and reduced effectiveness of intervening at a later stage. An early intervention approach allows all New Zealanders to have the opportunity and potential to contribute positively to society and have an enriched and well-adjusted life. (Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Social Development, 2002, p. 16)

However, the long-term effects of early identification and intervention are yet to be fully analysed. It is possible that through early identification that not only young people are stigmatised, but also particular social groups are stigmatised. It is even possible that young people from relatively normal families and groups miss out on services and provisions they might need. It may be that Western society is blinded by the reality that most people do not fit into the Western norm that more people are different than are the same and psychology, which is based on statistical norms only tells us half the truth.

Finally, through focusing on Western psychology and holding it as the truth, a youthless knowledge is also reinforced. Young people do not develop and construct psychological knowledge; it is a knowledge constructed by adults trying to understand difference. Psychology allows adults to define and describe the others in society. Although adults may use psychology to help young people, adults also use it to control young people, and sometimes; in this, adults risk forgetting young people themselves.

**But are not People Just Taking It out of Context**

Often, the media in Western countries is blamed for taking knowledge out of context. The media is seen as developing and enforcing negative youth stereotypes. However, stereotypes are often developed and enforced elsewhere. Nikolas Rose (1990) suggested that there are two types of knowledge—expertise and common sense, and both these forms of knowledge interact and feed into each other. Rose (1990) argued that common sense is knowledge that we validate through tautological references to an inherent truth within the knowledge, whereas expertise is knowledge that we validate through references to experts and researched truths.
Many of the common sense stereotypes of youth were actually once expertise and that expertise, in itself, was once common sense. For example, Hall’s (1905) theory was developed through scientific investigation and a meta-analysis of research studies. He developed an expertise of young people through referring to expertise (evolution) and popular myth (recapitulation theory). Hall’s expertise of adolescence connected adolescence with raging hormones, problematic behaviour, and overall storm and stress. Now, many of the Western stereotypes being developed and enforced by the media were once evident in Hall’s theory. People in the West assume that adolescents go through a period of storm and stress. People in the West assume that adolescence is a time of raging hormones and psychological turmoil. Indeed, many of the scientific theories in the West developed since Hall continue to reflect his ideas and in themselves have become commonsense. Erikson’s (1968) theory built on Hall’s ideas of psychological turmoil in a changing world. In turn, it is considered commonsense knowledge that young people all go through an identity crisis. Despite a caution from Erikson that his theory of adolescence was only applicable to the American teenager, his theory has become part of the popular psyche of adolescence. We can find the same pattern with Elkind’s (1979) ideas of adolescent self-centredness and risk taking. Again, his ideas can be found in Hall’s original theory and there is a common expectation within Western societies that young people are egocentric and risk takers.

Hence, the ways Western society applies knowledge to youth is not just limited to the media as people in other institutions are also constructing and reinforcing these ideas. This negative portrayal of youth serves many purposes. It can allow Western society to recognise general problems that young people are experiencing and it can allow for social institutions (e.g., schools) to allocate services to help make things better for young people. However, whether done in academia or the media, when there is a focus on the negativity of youth, there is a tendency to sensationalise youth in a negative way and transfer social problems onto young people. When young people are portrayed across institutional contexts as problematic, it justifies a social need to control of young people. So, there is a need to acknowledge an ethical responsibility in the development and use of knowledge.

Conclusion

Psychology is not the truth that has been discovered in Western societies; instead it is a truth that has been developed to understand ourselves and others in society. There is a need to acknowledge the constructed nature of psychology rather than continuing to assume psychology is a truth of self, which has been discovered over time. There is also a need to be conscious of the reasons for using psychology. Psychology is a valid and useful tool in contemporary Western society and should not be thrown out because of its problematic nature. Instead, psychology should be consciously used and those who are applying psychology should be critically aware of the potential effects of psychology. Psychology should not just be seen as philanthropic knowledge but a knowledge that is also used to govern. Taking this all into account, there is a final need to be prepared to think outside of psychology. Not all young people fit into the hole of psychology, rather than getting them younger, so we can shape them to fit into society, and maybe we need to find the right knowledge hole for them.

References


