

Editorial: engineering perceptions

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One of the main reasons for establishing this Journal was to highlight the dynamics of human health, which is governed by human behaviour from individuals' characteristics, environmental characteristics, health and social and economic policies, politics etc. Often in designing studies, strategies and policies dynamics is ignored. Dynamics is most important when designing a research and interpreting the results which then are used to develop policies. Media's interpretation of research results has and will contribute in confusing social perceptions of research and policy development.

There are many examples to quote, however, the following example is chose because of it personalise blame on the most vulnerable members of the society: mothers. The title of news report is a huge give away: "Mums harming kids through daycare – report"! Recently the New Zealand media covered a story about a report commissioned by Family First that reported on the adverse effects on the mental development of children placed in day care by their mothers (e.g. see http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10784082&ref=rss, and, <http://tvnz.co.nz/close-up/daycare-debate-video-4714907>). The Media's attempt to enlighten the public is based on its own perceptions of what the issues should be, which in turn is governed by the media's perception of its role in society as investigators or seekers of truth! There are two important and interesting issues that should be noted that are common to these types of investigations.

The first issue is that the media critique a social/health issue by personalising it. In other words, by personalising the issue the media (i) demonstrates public interest in the issue and thus, (ii) gets the public's attention. In the above example two entities have been linked harming children, namely mothers and child care. For example, the headline reads: mums harming kids through day care. The author of the report provides the opportunity for a secondary personalisation, e.g. the author is referred to as a "controversial" psychologist whilst an opponent is referred to as a "prominent" debunker (http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10784082&ref=rss).

Furthermore, as noticed in the TV debate (<http://tvnz.co.nz/close-up/daycare-debate-video-4714907>), shifting the focus onto mums has opened up a different set of social and individual issues including a woman's right to work. These types of debates prevent a critical assessment of the report in relation to public policy development in order to support mums, their children and the day care industry!

The second issue relates to a critical assessment of the report. Both the opponents and proponents of the report claim 'peer review' to support their arguments. Supporters of the report claimed that it was based on peer reviewed published work. The opponents of the report dismissed it while citing some other published work! The implications are that: (1) in recent times there has been a shift of emphasis in the original purpose of the peer review process, (2) peer review is not proof of validity, (3) an undue social emphasis on 'research', i.e. the belief that research is definitive and must be believed, (4) thus forgetting the purpose

of research is to stimulate debate, (5) a social failing (by scientists) to understand the role of scientific research.

Certainly, the main keywords such as research, scientific, peer review, systematic review have become more commonplace in the public domain and are used arbitrarily and uncritically. In the public domain, to capture the public mind and therefore influence behaviour, it is common to hear phrases such as 'research shows that...', 'science proves that...', 'it is scientifically developed...', or, 'it is scientifically shown that...', as the ultimate proof of a statement.

In the scientific community there is a lack of critical approach to studying issues of human behaviour. Despite a peer reviewed process most published research has flaws and limitations commonly related to design, methodology, sampling, analytical methodology, and interpretation of results.

Most experienced researchers should be familiar with these issues, however, it seems that the familiarity only begins when criticising a research report that they disagree with and ends with their own research. As a consequence there will be vagueness in policy development process and diversion from the main issues, in this case, supporting mums and day care industry to nurture and eliminate negative health effects from any source.

The net effect of the uncritical use of research to give credence to any statement is the exact opposite through the devaluation and erosion of the social standing of research and science in the public mindset. The public (and decision makers) has become desensitised to research and use it when it suits a purpose, a statement, or, a lack of action. The politicisation of research/science has become politically-based as opposed to evidence-based decision making. Suicide prevention is one of the many examples of political-based decision making.