

Dodo-Bird or Dressing up the Pig and the Politics of Psychotherapy: A Reply to Vandenberghe and de Sousa (2005)

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Abstract

It is fitting that the concept of all having one and having prizes is attributed to the Dodo-Bird. The dodo was a flightless bird. In shape and form it was similar to the modern turkey. The dodo was native to Mauritius, where it lived for thousands of years before domestic animals brought to Mauritius hunted it to extinction. The last live specimen was seen in 1681. The words of the dodo-bird having been long extinct are the perfect way to reflect on Smith, Glass and Miller (1980).

Key words: Dodo bird, placebo treatments, attention control, control group, meta-analysis.

Introduction

If the reader will pardon my indulgence, most biologists thought that coelacanths had been extinct for 70 million years until 1938 when fishermen of South Africa were found to have been regularly catching and eating them. I am equally shocked to see Vandenberghe and de Sousa have resurrected the Dodo-bird again based on Smith, Glass and Miller (1980). But it is really not the dodo at all but a dressed up pig.

Let me rehash three well know arguments about the meta-analysis conducted by Smith and colleagues:

1. The first is that Smith and colleague's (1980) table of treatments list placebo treatment and attention control as active treatments. Why would this occur? Simple the formula for meta-analysis for a continuous outcome is reported as the difference between the treatment mean and the control mean divided by the standard deviation in the control group.

If one moves the placebo treatment over to the control side, then the whole meta-analysis reports no-effect for psychotherapy. This statistical slight of hand was first reported by Prioleau, Murdock & Brody (1983) and echoed by others since then (e.g., Cautilli & Skinner, 2001).

2. Even if one buys that placebo treatment is a treatment, and then a fair report of meta-analysis would be that no form of psychotherapy is better than any other form including placebo control treatment. I believe even Eysenk (1952, 1983, 1994) would have supported this conclusion. So why is this not mentioned? Glass (2000) offers some insight "Psychologists tended to fixate on the fact that the analysis gave no warrant to any claims that one type or style of psychotherapy was any more effective than any other: whether called "behavioral" or "Rogerian" or "rational" or "psychodynamic," all the therapies seemed to work and to work to about the same degree of effectiveness." (p. 3). Mays and Franks (1980) in discussing possible deleterious effects of psychotherapy

placed such discussions squarely on the need of an emerging profession to justify itself by showing it was “safe” and “effective” to the insurance industry and federal funders.

3. One final issue, Vaudenberghe and colleagues (2005) argue that Smith et al (1980) places further interest into the therapeutic relationship. This is certainly not how Cronbach (1982) saw it. He argued that Smith and colleagues stripped psychotherapy of context. It did not matter if you liked your therapist, if your problem had been occurring one week, one month, one year fifty years, it did not matter if the treatment was a week or a month this thing called psychotherapy worked.

My argument is not that legitimate meta-analysis cannot be accomplished, but that in a world with multiple contingencies operating on each scientist careful review of the methods and procedures is needed. Nor is my argument that functional analytic psychotherapy (Kohlenberg and Tsai, 1991) is not effective. From my perspective, forty years of considerable research exists to support the notion of building rapport and targeting clinically relevant behavior in session with behavioral principles such as reinforcement and extinction (see a brief review in Cautilli, Tillman, Axelrod and Hines, 2005) as done in functional analytic psychotherapy (Kohlenberg and Tsai, 1991). My point is simply that Smith and colleagues dressed up the pig to sell her to governments and the insurance industry.

The field of psychotherapy is past the need to self-justify. We need to take an honest look at our past and recognize what was science and what was politics.

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