

Notes on Error or Fraud? Posthumous Book of Ernesto Pollitt

Notas sobre ¿Error o fraude?: libro póstumo de Ernesto Pollitt

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Pollitt, E. (2016). *Error or Fraud? Deceptions and Mistakes in Child Psychobiological Research*. Lima: Publishing Arm of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. 198 pages. ISBN: 978-612-317-170-4

The year 2016 starts with sad news for the Peruvian and international psychological community: the decease of Dr. Ernesto Pollitt Burga, considered one of the most important Peruvian psychologists in our country and the most international renowned psychologist (Arias, 2016; Caycho, 2016; Raez, 2016). He was a specialist in several topics related to child development such as effects of nutrition and malnutrition in child development and behavior. Several months after he died, the university Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), where Pollitt studied psychology, via its publishing arm, published the last book of the national famous psychologist titled *Error or Fraud? Deceptions and Mistakes in Child Psychobiological Research*, which addresses an important but little understood topic: formulation of social policies based on valid and reliable scientific evidences aimed at improving health and life conditions of childhood.

Although the importance of the topic, and except for the review made by Cueto (2016), the publication of the work has been relatively unnoticed in the Peruvian academic environments. The book gathers a lot of very useful information for people who are immersed in the scientific research on child development, and it is based on the author's experience over several years of intense fieldwork, clinical observations and interventions about social and biological conditions of childhood in Peru and the world.

The book is composed of a prologue, an introduction, six chapters and a glossary of terms. In the prologue Dra. Susana Frisnacho, professor at the PUCP, very aptly states that the text of Pollitt "fill, undoubtedly, a gap in the literature specialized in psychological research in our country." (p. 13) We could not be more agree, since the topic about fraud and errors in psychological research, and why not saying in other sciences as well, it is constant at all times.

The introduction of Pollitt is not only a summary of what the reader could find in the book, but also first and foremost, it is an expression of the theoretical and methodological guidelines followed by the author in order to make analyses and reach conclusions of each chapter. Here, and since the beginning, Pollitt mentions the main topic of the whole book when writing that:

Ideally, social policies and regulations, as well as professional practices aimed at improving the life quality of a person, a group or a society must be based on valid and reliable (evidence) generated through the scientific method (p. 17).

Thus, in this introduction, the author reviews concepts such as the psychobiological development, plasticity and methodologies, controlled research or clinical assay, its benefits and limitations, ethics in experimental designs, limitations of using scales to evaluate mental development, types of errors when making decisions on a hypothesis, conceptualized by Pollitt as “those situations where the author has not had any intention and has not been aware of the error” (p. 22), and their difference and relationship with fraud which, although it is difficult to be defined, it is common to associated it with “fabrication, forgery and plagiarism of information” (p. 22). Furthermore, in the introduction, Pollit talks about the importance of analyzing the several personal, institutional, economic and politic pressures that could cause a scientific to commit a fraud.

Chapter 1 analyzes two cases of fraud and error. The first one describes the case of the biochemist Ranjit Chandra and his research work on the cognitive impairment in elderly and the benefits of a series of vitamin and mineral supplements. Several publications accounted for the methodological mistakes of the study, which caused the journal *Nutrition* where Chandra’s study was originally published, to retract the research publication adducing that Chandra gave poor answers to his critics, doubts about the validity of other publications and economic interest in vitamin and mineral supplement. The second case is Cyril Burt case that is known worldwide in the psychological

field. He was accused of fabricating data of his study. All of this caused a series of controversies that lasted more than 20 years after the death of the English psychologist.

In Chapter 2, Pollitt analyzes one of the most discussed cases in psychology: John Money and the gender reassignment of David Reimer. Theoretical postulates of Money in relation to human development, gender identity and the influence of the environment and social learning on them are analyzed. Then the case of David Reimer and the criticism of Money's work that caused David to suffer from psychological problems are described. Pollitt concludes that:

Johns Hopkins' institutional decisions on allowing Bruce's gender reassignment were based on a doubtfully valid proposal on the environmental determinism in the psychosexual development. The academy of Johns Hopkins was culpable for a very serious misjudgment or more serious than John Money's mistake (p. 60).

Chapter 3 is focused on a case of Latin America: the Ministry for the Intelligence Development in Venezuela led by Luis Alberto Machado, attorney, poet, humanist and philosopher. Pollitt concluded in this paragraph that the Venezuelan macro-project was established based on an inadequate use of scientific information along with especially political and economic objectives.

Chapter 4 emphasizes the relationships between biology and socio-cultural characteristics from the analysis of a study carried out in Zanzibar (Africa) about the influence of iron administration on the reduction of repetition and dropout of students from the community. It can be concluded that according to Pollitt, biological, socio-cultural factors as well as biophysical environment factors have influence on child development.

The topic about intestinal parasites and its relationship with cognitive and academic performance through biological mechanisms, such as loss of hemoglobin and micronutrients in the brain, is discussed in Chapter 5.

Pollitt analyzes the benefits of anthelmintic treatments in “the cognitive development and school performance” (p. 151) supported by international organizations, trying to respond the following question: “Which data evidence such effects?” (p. 151). Based on the thorough review of a series of research works and official reports of international organizations, such as the World Bank, the World Health Organization and UNICEF, Pollitt concludes that the information derived from scientific and institutional sources is divergent, which leads to state that there is no evidence that justifies the implementation of deworming programs in children. The Minister states that:

In my opinion, the World Bank and the el WHO, based on theoretical but not empirical proposals, jumped to conclusions that provoked the start-up of deworming programs in several low per capita income countries. Fraud? (p. 171).

Chapter 6 describes the main conclusions of the study. Here, Pollitt uses the information derived from each of the chapters to propose a theoretical model about the factors that influence the quality of the information obtained from scientific studies. Here we can first mention the scientific research phases (the theory chosen, hypothesis formulation, as well as research design and data interpretation), cognitive demands of the researcher and personal, institutional, economic and cultural pressures, which can cause to make mistakes during the research process that, in turn, as Pollitt says, “it can lead to the creation of social interventions affecting the child psychobiological development.” (p. 178)

At the end of the book, there is a glossary with some similar terms that are very useful to fully understand the concepts and the analysis from the book reading. The bibliography sections of each one of the chapters are of special importance and interest and they have several references about experimental works on child psychobiological development and the factors that influence it.

The book that we have just reviewed cannot be considered an insensitive article of the facts contained in it, but it is a text that makes readers’ hearts

shake, proposing many questions about how much there is still to do in terms of social policies for childhood, not only in Peru, but also in several Latina American countries. We believe that the book, of unique nature in our Peruvian psychological bibliography, will serve for making a different analysis when addressing topics about childhood and what we can do for it.

The quality of the work lies in its objectives and a broad range of subjects, as well as in the erudition of the author, since Pollitt tries to provide the reader with the most complete image of the importance of the serious scientific research through an adequate academic style that retains the minds starting reading it.

Error or Fraud? Deceptions and Mistakes in Child Psychobiological Research is a reading recommended for any health professional who wants to know about formulating social policies for childhood based on evidence. The selection of each one of the chapters is appropriate and the introduction gives a great theoretical and methodological value to the work.

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