Some of the best psychological research suffers for the sake of 'political correctness.'

By Beth Azar
Monitor staff

Since the time of Copernicus, theories and findings that contradict traditional wisdom have been met with skepticism and scorn. Politicians, the public and even some scientists themselves have railed against data that defy current thinking or are "politically incorrect."

Behavioral research is particularly ripe with controversial topics that people would rather sweep under the carpet, researchers say. Studies that hint at problems with child care could lead people to believe women belong at home with their children. Intelligence research often brings up uncomfortable questions about racial differences. Research findings that tout more comprehensive sex education in schools offend some traditional moral and religious beliefs. Some researchers in these fields have had their work discarded, ignored or censored because of their findings.

Yet while such research ignites emotions, it is essential for developing well-informed public policy. Most researchers argue that no line of research should be banned if it's well done and peer reviewed. However, some scientists admit that certain studies don't deserve the highest priority from funding agencies or journals if they address topics that have the potential to hurt certain populations with little promise of helping them.

"Science is basically a conservative enterprise," says psychologist Brian Gladue, PhD, of the University of Cincinnati, who studies the relationship between hormone levels and behaviors such as aggression and sexuality. "The people who control funding, tenure and publishing tend to stick with what they know. And those who want to break out and create new knowledge do so at their own risk."

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Bksly. For example, studies that find problems with any care are reviewed more critically than those with more optimistic results, he believes. In one case, an article submitted to Developmental Psychology by Deborah Vaguolo, Ph.D., and Mary Cornish, Ph.D., reported that the more time children spent in day care, the more negatively parents and teachers rated them. When some of the same grades were those that had the lowest scores on standardized tests in third grade. Although Belsky—himself not a formal reviewer of the paper—thought the study reported in the article had some very special features, the reviewers—all of whom shared the opinion that high-quality care did not have consistent effects—virtually ignored those attempts and the journal rejected the article based on their highly critical evaluations, says Belsky. The article was eventually published in New Directions in Child Development, a less prestigious but equally rigorous journal.

Others disagree with Belsky. Most scientists put their political and personal opinions aside when they review articles and judge them on the scientific validity of the study, says Sara Friedman, Ph.D., of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. To truly be disinterested, Belsky claims, someone would have to conduct a study of their own, submitting two identical studies, each with a different conclusion. Self-censoring

If researchers begin to shy away from controversial topics or unanswerable findings because of the professional risks, their credibility is at stake, says Glade. Self-censorship paralyzes the image that behavioral and social science has enjoyed in the agenda of an unbiased scientific field—an image that politicians have used to argue against funding such research.

For example, took you, then-Rep. Robert Walker (R-PA) tried to abolish the National Science Foundation’s Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences directorate on the grounds that it funds “political” research. In his mind, social-science research in general is biased and out to support a politically correct agenda. A strong defense, mounted by scientists from all fields, professional associations and NSF advisory boards, saved the directorate.

So suppressing data for politically correct reasons only provides support for arguments like Walker’s and Glade’s. Because, if research is buried, it will only come back to bite us later, says Belsky. “It may take a while for the baby to float up from the bottom,” he says, “but if data have merit, it will eventually look out to scientists. And the attempt to control the data will fail and embarras the people who tried to keep it down.”