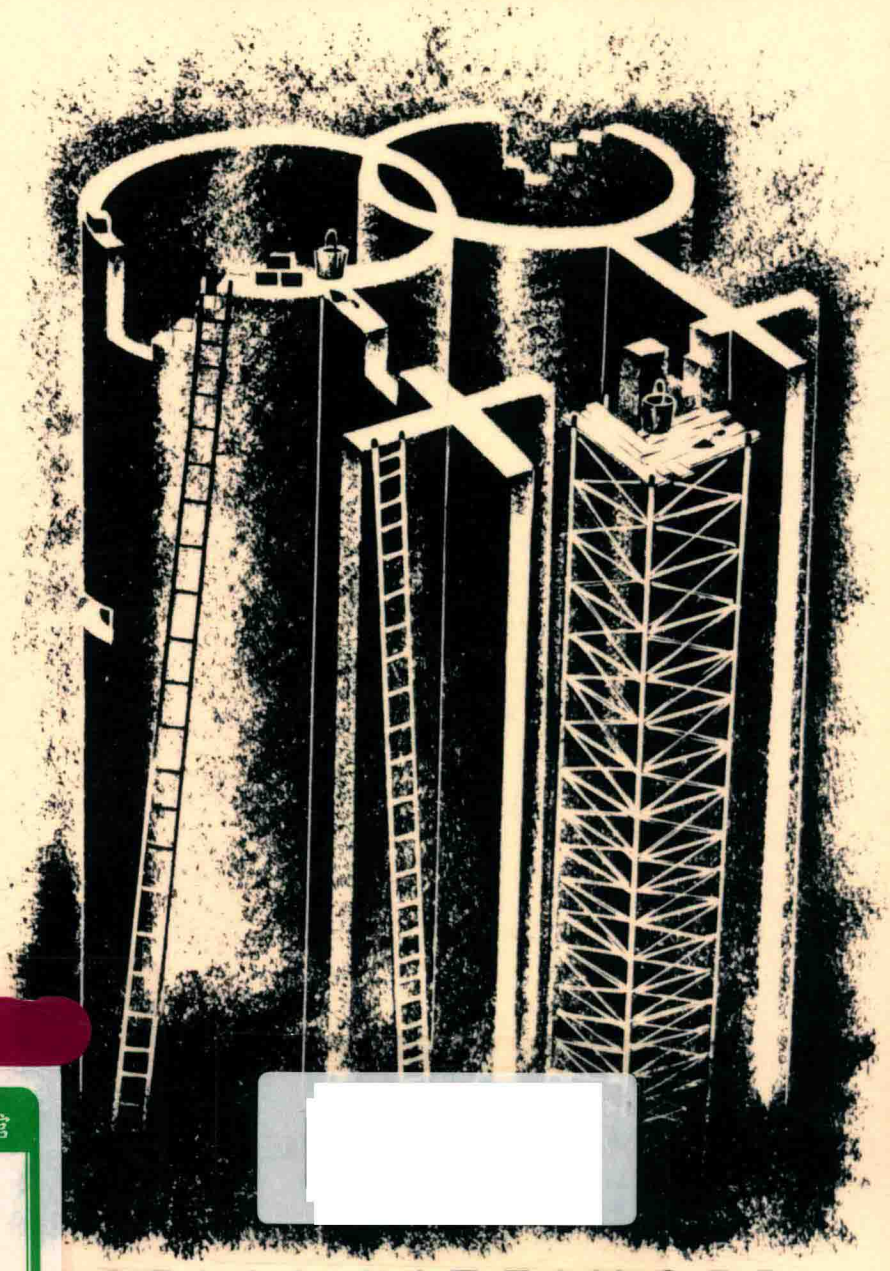
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF

LESBIANISM



CELIA KITZINGER

The Social Construction of Lesbianism

Inquiries in
Social Construction Series

SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

First published 1987
Reprinted 1989 (twice), 1990, 1993, 1995

Inquiries in Social Construction Series
Editors: Kenneth Gergen and John Shotter

SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash - I
New Delhi 110 048

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Kitzinger, Celia
The social construction of lesbianism.
1. Lesbianism
I. Title
306.7'663 HQ75.5

ISBN 978-0-8039-8117-1

Library of Congress catalog card number 87–062029

The Social Construction of Lesbianism

For my parents
With love

Preface

The old model of lesbianism as pathology, which dominated social scientific theorizing until the 1970s, is an easy target for criticism and has been widely challenged for its methodological inadequacies and ideological biases. But the more recent self-styled 'gay affirmative' research has generally been acclaimed by feminists and lesbians within and outside social science. In 'gay affirmative' research, lesbianism is constructed in liberal humanistic terms as an alternative lifestyle, a way of loving, a sexual preference, a route to personal fulfilment or a form of self-actualization. It is this more recent and apparently 'pro-lesbian' research, and the ordinary everyday social constructions of lesbianism which it draws upon and helps to construct, that is the target of my critique in this book.

The central argument of this book is that so-called 'gay affirmative' research, far from being a liberating force, represents a new development in the oppression of lesbians. Drawing on my own research, as well as an extensive review of the literature, I argue that the shift from 'pathological' to 'gay affirmative' models merely substitutes one depoliticized construction of the lesbian with another, while continuing to undermine systematically radical feminist theories of lesbianism. Gay affirmative researchers have tried to 'add lesbians in' to existing psychological theories. But these theories have not just left lesbians out. They have been constructed in accordance with liberal humanistic ideology so that it is impossible to put lesbians back in, except in individualistic terms as persons making private sexual choices and enjoying particular kinds of personal relationships. These constructions are incompatible with radical feminist and lesbian separatist constructions in which lesbianism is fundamentally a political statement representing the bonding of women against male supremacy.

Liberal humanistic constructions of lesbianism are widespread not only within psychology and its allied disciplines but within the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement: many (liberal) feminists today talk about lesbianism as no more than a choice of lifestyle, a sexual preference, the outcome of 'true love', or a route to 'true happiness'. By contrast, the *radical* feminist argument is based on the belief that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is fundamental to the patriarchal oppression of women: lesbianism,

then, represents women's refusal to collaborate in our own betrayal. It is this identification of heterosexuality as central to women's oppression that is characteristic of the radical (or revolutionary) feminist approach. So while, for example, it is possible to present the argument that all women should become lesbians either from within a liberal humanistic ideology or from a radical feminist perspective, the rationale behind these two arguments is entirely different: liberal humanism argues that lesbianism helps women to achieve liberal humanistic goals (happiness, sexual fulfilment, better personal relationships) whereas radical feminism argues that lesbianism helps to achieve radical feminist goals (the overthrow of male supremacy). In this book, I argue that liberal humanistic ideology, especially when used ostensibly in support of lesbianism, as in much recent social science research and within the contemporary feminist movement generally, prevents women from recognizing male power and identifying our oppression.

This argument is introduced in Chapter 1, which uses the literature on lesbianism and male homosexuality to illustrate the rhetorical techniques through which social science constructs the conditions for its own legitimacy. In this, as in subsequent chapters, I draw on material predominantly or exclusively concerned with male homosexuality, in addition to material concerned solely with lesbians, both because of the relative paucity of research on female as compared with male homosexuality and because of the frequent incorporation of women as an afterthought into models based on male homosexuality. Furthermore, the research on lesbianism and male homosexuality spans a range of social scientific (and other) disciplines, including social and clinical psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, biology, psychiatry, and sexology. My own training in psychology leads the focus to research in this area, but the boundaries between psychology and related disciplines are fuzzy, and research under other social science labels is often both salient and 'psychological'.

In Chapter 2 I begin to explore the content of scientifically legitimated constructions of lesbianism, from the early sexology at the turn of the century to contemporary gay affirmative research. After describing my methodological approaches in Chapter 3, I show, in the following three empirically based chapters, the operation of liberal humanistic ideology in the construction of lesbian identities (Chapter 4), lesbian politics (Chapter 5) and in heterosexual attitudes to lesbians (Chapter 6).

In the last chapter (Chapter 7) I suggest that if future research on lesbianism is to avoid complicity in the silencing of lesbianism as a political reality it must reject the traditional model of science as an

objective search for truths or facts about the world; instead researchers must examine their own rhetoric, and evaluate their political commitments. Above all, we must begin to recognize and to deconstruct the liberal humanistic ideology pervasive throughout research in this field.

The research reported here has appeared in different forms elsewhere as follows:

'Psychology Constructs the Lesbian: The Politics and Science of Lesbianism', paper presented at the Social Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society, University of Sheffield, September 1983 (abstract appears in Bulletin of BPS, 36, A106).

'Researching Lesbianism — Discovering Q', *Studies in Sexual Politics* 2: 35–47.

(With Rex Stainton Rogers), 'A Q Methodological Study of Lesbian Identities', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15: 167–87.

'Introducing and Developing Q as a Feminist Methodology', in S. Wilkinson (ed.) *Feminist Social Psychology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

'Liberal Humanism as an Ideology of Social Control: The Regulation of Lesbian Identities', paper presented at International Interdisciplinary Conference on Self and Identity, Cardiff, July 1984 (abstract in Bulletin of BPS, 37: A114; also to appear as a chapter in K. Gergen and J. Shotter [1987] *Texts of Identity*, Sage Publications, of whose symposium it formed a part).

Acknowledgements

Many people have listened to what I am trying to say in this book, and have helped me to say it better. I am very grateful to Rex Stainton Rogers who was generous with his time and thoughtful with his criticism in supervising the Ph.D thesis from which this book is drawn. I would like to thank Sheila Kitzinger for listening to my various drafts through many long telephone conversations, and for providing a liberal humanistic foil for my arguments. I am also indebted to the other Q methodologists and social constructionists whose work provided helpful stimulus to my thinking, especially Alison Thomas, Jenny Kitzinger, and Wendy Stainton Rogers, and to Halla Beloff, Steven Brown and William Stephenson, who provided much needed encouragement. Farrell Burnett has been a careful and enthusiastic editor. My thanks go also to Martha Hatch whose love and support sustained me throughout the writing of this book.

The research reported here was funded for the first three years by the Social Science Research Council (now the Economic and Social Research Council), and for the last six months by a Demonstratorship at the University of Reading.

Finally, my greatest thanks must go to all the lesbian women who participated in this research and who taught me the myriad of different ways in which women cope with oppression, accommodate to it in our everyday lives, and fight back.

Contents

1

Rhetoric in Research on Lesbianism and Male Homosexuality

> Every group in power tells its story as it would like to have it believed, in the way it thinks will promote its interests. (Becker and Horowitz, 1972)

The established approach to a literature review, reflected in numerous introductory sections of research papers and first chapters of books on homosexuality, is based on the implicit question 'What does previous research tell us about homosexuality?' This standard approach presents as its aim the advancement of scientific knowledge: its authors use the conventional language and concepts of the social sciences to describe and assess the research findings they review, cataloguing their merits and demerits, attempting to resolve competing theories and results, or summarizing and defining the parameters of the 'known' as a springboard for their own empirical or theoretical leap into the unknown. The overwhelming majority of literature reviews on homosexuality and lesbianism share this ostensible aim of advancing knowledge about homosexuality within the standard rules of scientific endeavour.

The first two chapters of this book offer alternative approaches to the standard literature reviews of this kind. Instead of addressing the question 'What does the literature tell us about homosexuality?', I ask first, in this chapter, 'What can we learn from the literature about the construction of social scientific accounts?' and then, in Chapter 2, 'What can we learn from the literature about attempts to manage and control homosexuality?'

Within the sociology of science, a variety of techniques of analysis of scientific writing have been employed. Some authors have compared scientists' formal accounts of scientific activity with what the researcher observed in the laboratory (Knorr-Cetina, 1983) or with informal (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1980) or media (Barber and Fox, 1958) presentation of the same material. Others discuss the problems of reading back from the accounts to what 'actually happened' (Woolgar, 1976) or compare reported results with their own re-analysis of raw data (Wolins, 1962). From a Marxist perspective, scientific papers can be conceptualized as commodities, like pieces of plastic or carburettors, with a known exchange value

for money, degrees, or reputation (e.g. Pickvance, 1976); from the perspective of games theory research papers result from competitive activity and are analogous to scoring a goal (Smith, 1984); from a psychoanalytic or 'psychocritical' (Coward, 1977: 12) perspective, scientific accounts are traced back to the personality problems and unconscious psychological mechanisms of the account provider (e.g. Fisher and Fisher, 1955; Kurtz and Maiolo, 1968; Riebel, 1982).

The approach I adopt in this chapter deliberately avoids comparison of the scientific account with any presumed 'reality', whether external or internal to its authors. Instead of demonstrating the discrepancy between different accounts of the same research (formal, informal, re-analysed, media-produced) or illustrating the dependence of accounts on their social context or psychological origins, such discrepancies and dependencies are assumed and the chapter explores the rhetorical features of scientific writing which act to conceal these elements and to reinforce and perpetuate the received image of scientific objectivity.

Despite calls for a sociology of psychological knowledge (Buss, 1975), the majority of research into the rhetorical features of science has been concerned with reports from within the natural sciences — work on the discovery of the optical pulsar (Garfinkle et al., 1982), on the structure of deoxyribose nucleic acid (Bazerman, 1981), gravitational radiation (Collins, 1982) and oxidative phosphorylation (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1982), for example. Gusfield's (1976) study of the literary rhetoric of drinking-driver research is a rare exception. Nonetheless, social psychology has been described as an 'outstanding example' of the inherently rhetorical nature of science, appealing to subjectively shared, rather than indubitably true premises, and containing extrafactual, extralogical arguments designed to persuade and seduce (cf. Simons, 1980: 120). Weigert (1970) characterizes social scientists generally as engaging in wilful self-serving forms of selling and displaying indoctrination and ingratiation no different from the practices of advertisers or politicians: according to Weigert, journal editors and readers are courted by means of various impression-management techniques, and weaknesses in theory or research are concealed or rationalized.

Social scientific writing on homosexuality serves as a particularly interesting case study for research into scientific accounting procedures for five reasons.

Firstly, unlike the physical sciences, normally seen as offering the template of science upon which other disciplines have traditionally modelled themselves, the social sciences confront a certain reluctance on the part of the public to accord them the prestige attached to inclusion within the charmed circle of 'science' (Gellner, 1985:

112). This credibility problem leads to the incorporation into psychological and sociological accounts of comparatively more overt and conscientious efforts to depict themselves as 'truly scientific'. One analysis of the opening chapters of introductory sociology textbooks found, for example, that:

> Sociology stands out in its lengthy attempt to defend its place in the world of science. Psychologists and economists come closest to the sociological pattern. . . . Political scientists, chemists and physicists seem to accept their place in the knowledge structure without such a defense and, in most cases, proceed directly to their subject matter. (Kurtz and Maiolo, 1968: 40)

Furthermore, because many academics view research on homosexuality and lesbianism with a considerable degree of suspicion and hostility (sufficient that researchers are often warned that they are risking their academic careers by studying this topic — my own experience and that of Crew and Norton, 1974; Katz, 1976: 8; and McDaniel, 1982, amongst others), the emphasis on 'scientific' presentation is often compounded in an attempt to forestall criticism and counteract ridicule: this makes research on homosexuality a particularly rich source of scientific accounting procedures.

Secondly, the social sciences in general deal with topics debated and commented on beyond the specialized scientific circles devoted to their study. Unlike oxidative phosphorylation, for example, homosexuality is widely discussed in terms of religion (the moral fervour generated by the Kinsey reports in the 1950s is matched today by the religious appropriation of AIDS as God's answer to a new Sodom and Gomorrah), and, more recently, politics. Both religion and politics are defined not just as extrinsic to but as incompatible with the pursuit of 'pure' scientific knowledge, and research on homosexuality has, therefore, to deal with the problem of defining its own claims to knowledge as distinct from, and superior to, the claims made from within these competing 'lay' perspectives. The rhetorical ploy labelled here (following Halmos, 1978) as 'mythologizing of expertise' is an attempt to deal with this problem by fiat, asserting the cognitive supremacy of accurate scientific conceptualizations over common 'stereotypes', 'myths' and 'prejudices'.

Thirdly, following the recent shift from predominantly pathology-based (pre-1970s) to predominantly (though not exclusively) life-style-based models of homosexuality — a shift sufficiently marked for some adherents of the new model to characterize it as a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense (Gonsiorek, 1982a) — adherents of this new approach are generally dissatisfied with the

vast bulk of past research on homosexuality and are highly sceptical about its scientific credibility (e.g. Birke, 1980; Shavelson et al., 1980; Suppe, 1981). This scepticism leads them to engage in a variety of accounting procedures to explain the apparent existence of pervasive and long-standing 'error' in the scientific research of their field. As Mulkay and Gilbert (1982) point out, 'most practising scientists regard the existence of error as a threat to the enterprise of science', and an elaborate repertoire of interpretative resources is employed to account for such 'mistakes' while never questioning the traditional conception of scientific rationality itself. Representation of scientific progress based on the 'up the mountain' story (Rorty, 1980), whereby all previous research is seen as a steady progression towards recognition of the truths now attained, is one important way of accounting for past error.

Fourthly, the degree of dissensus and controversy within recent psychological theorizing about homosexuality is potentially sufficient to pose a severe threat to the traditional conceptualization of psychology as a science. Researchers working within variants of the long-established 'pathological' model (e.g. Kronemeyer, 1980; Moberly, 1983) confront proponents of the more recent 'lifestyle' model (most notably those publishing in the *Journal of Homosexuality*) across a conceptual chasm unbridgeable by scientific experiment or empirical advance. Controversy is not, of course, always a threat to science, and scientists rarely, if ever, present an entirely consensual account of the phenomena they investigate — indeed, it has been suggested that controversy within science is a means whereby the academic community as a whole 'hedges its bets': with a diversity of opinion on any given topic, they can't *all* be wrong. Nonetheless, the bulk of work in a given area typically shares certain unquestioned first principles or indubitable propositions which determine the research questions considered appropriate. Given a different set of first principles, different questions would be asked, and when this situation arises, the adherents of each set of first principles see the answers generated in response to the questions derived from the other set not as wrong, and to be subjected to detailed criticism, but as simply irrelevant (Gouldner, 1970: 7). For example, Garfinkle (1981) points out that the shift from medieval to Newtonian theories of motion involved the rejection of the old question 'Why does an object in motion keep moving?'; Newton argued that the question itself was misguided, and as the answer gave the trivial 'it just does'. Similarly, Darwinian biology fails to answer Aristotle's question as to why, out of all the species that could possibly exist, only some in fact do (i.e. Why porcupines but not unicorns?).

> The scientific advance that Darwin made can partly be seen as a rejection of that question and the substitution of a different question, namely: given that a species comes to exist (however it does), why does it continue to exist or cease to exist? (Garfinkle, 1981)

Similarly, the research questions generated by the 'pathological' model of homosexuality (as much as 70 percent of pre-1974 psychological research on homosexuality was devoted to the three questions 'Are homosexuals sick?', 'How can it be diagnosed?' and 'What causes it?' [Morin, 1977]) are rejected as irrelevant by the 'lifestyle' researchers, whose alternative questions (concerning, for example, the pathology of the homophobe or the enhancement of intimate gay relationships) are in turn dismissed by the 'pathologists'.

Dissent and controversy of this fundamental nature may come to be subsequently viewed as, Garfinkle (1981) suggests, constituting a major epoch in the development of a science, but it also poses a potentially severe threat to the traditional conceptualization of science itself by exposing the uncertain nature of knowledge claims and their reliance on a bedrock of a priori assumptions. Merton (1971) argues that dissensus causes social scientists to feel insecure about their professional roles, and Ezrahi (1971: quoted in Barnes and Edge, 1982: 239) cites peer consensus as a major modulator of scientific credibility. As Barnes and Edge (1982: 239) point out, 'where experts publicly disagree, their authority and influence are reduced'.

Consequently, contemporary researchers on homosexuality engage in rhetorical devices which have the dual function of both explaining the errors of their opponents and, simultaneously, reinforcing the institution of science. The rhetoric of 'scientific method' is the prime example of discourse of this type, whereby rival researchers are excommunicated from the scientific fold and their findings dismissed as 'not proper science'.

Finally, both historical 'error' and contemporary controversy lead to a generally greater awareness among scientists of the contribution of extrascientific and psychosocial components to scientific research. Woolgar (1983) shows how scientists tend to see their theories as 'reflective' of reality during periods of scientific consensus, whereas during the (relatively short-lived) periods of controversy, science is more likely to be represented as 'mediative' or 'constitutive' of reality. Controversy, claims Collins (1983a: 95) acts as an 'auto-garfinkle' for scientific knowledge in that the taken-for-granted rules of science are thrown into question by the fact that they no longer produce unproblematic outcomes.

References to extrascientific contributions to scientific theories (e.g. social mores or personal prejudice) are commonplace in

research on homosexuality in accounting for error. However, whereas in traditional scientific accounts such allusions function as explanations of past failings and exhortations to better practice, the same observations are used by antiscientists, both within and outside the scientific professions, to challenge the epistemological basis of the social sciences per se. Deconstructing the traditional claims of science to represent a dispassionate search for objective truths, antiscientists like Szasz (1971) use research on homosexuality as a paradigmatic example of the thesis that social science reflects social norms, functions to reinforce and legitimate the ideological hegemony of the powerful (in this case, heterosexuals) and defines as 'sick' those who refuse to conform to the dominant definition of reality. According to this argument, social science is expressly intended to fulfil this controlling and manipulative function: is not something that happens 'by mistake' when researchers stray from the path of methodological purity, but is the very raison d'être of social science. Homosexuality joins the nineteenth-century disease of 'masturbatory insanity', the soviet diagnostic category 'reformist delusions', and the eighteenth-century disease of slaves, 'drapetomania' (manifested by their tendency to run away from the plantations) as diseases constructed to reinforce and legitimate the status quo (Stone and Faberman, 1981).

Useful as this thesis is for discrediting 'pathology' based research on homosexuality (and both 'lifestyle' researchers and Gay Liberationists generally have used it in this way), its representation of social science as *inherently* ideological and manipulative means that it also embodies an implicit critique of contemporary 'lifestyle' based social scientific research. (An explicit, feminist-informed rendering of this critique is presented in Chapter 2.) Because its critique is potentially directed against their own scientific practices as much as against those of their opponents, 'lifestyle' researchers are generally careful to differentiate their own condemnation of previous research from that of the scientific deconstructionists (cf. Gonsiorek, 1982c and Hencken, 1982, for overt attempts at such differentiation). All three of the techniques already mentioned (the 'up the mountain' story, the rhetoric of scientific method, and the mythologizing of expertise) serve this purpose, but utility accounting is an important additional rhetorical technique. Using utility accounting, the 'lifestyle' researchers offer themselves and their work to be of service to the gay community: unlike researchers of the past, who admittedly exploited, oppressed and degraded homosexuals, contemporary lifestyle theorists offer techniques of positive gay-identity acquisition, methods of dealing with internalized homophobia, research supporting the right of the lesbian

mother to child custody, and the need for gay-affirmative education in schools.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to a discussion and exploration of the construction of formal social scientific accounts of homosexuality and lesbianism. Despite my own clear theoretical allegiances (discussed in Chapter 2), I attempt, in this chapter, to bracket the question of the scientific validity of the theoretical models or empirical research under investigation, maintaining 'an attitude of rigid abstinence from epistemological judgements' (Berger, 1965). The aim here is not to serve as an arbiter among these competing psychologies but to examine how each selectively portrays itself and its location within the scientific domain in such a way as to reinforce the image of psychology and its allied disciplines as the sole purveyors of legitimate knowledge about the social world. They are discussed in relation to five themes (inevitably neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive) each of which contributes, in its own way, to the image of science as 'valid knowledge': the 'up the mountain' saga, the rhetoric of scientific method, the mythologizing of expertise, the utility account, and, finally, the stylistic features of scientific writing as they might be approached from the perspective of literary criticism.

The 'up the mountain' saga

The literature reviews which typically introduce research papers on homosexuality and lesbianism display, to varying degrees, a certain optimism about the role of social science research on this topic: while lamenting the poor quality of much of the past research, they are confident that future work (by themselves or their colleagues) will be a significant improvement. This optimism represents one aspect of what Tyler (1973) describes as a 'hopeful psychology'.

> Modern scientific psychology is rooted in hope. It was initiated at a time when the idea of progress had taken a powerful hold on men's [*sic*] imaginations. Theories that man had degenerated since his beginnings in some far past golden age and theories that man's history is nothing but an endless series of cycles from perfection to decadence to dissolution had by the middle of the nineteenth century given way to the theory that steady progress had occurred since the dawn of human history and would continue to occur. It was science that had made such progress possible, and the establishment of a science of man's own mental life was seen as an important step in the triumphant advance that was to lead to a golden age in the future rather than the past. (Tyler, 1973: 1021)

The story that scientists tell about this arduous and uphill journey towards the golden age (described by Medawar [1963] as a technique in which 'you concede, more or less graciously, that