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# Social Psychology's Three Little Pigs

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*Three perspectives on the nature of scientific research are discussed allegorically: (1) basic science, or the study of theoretically meaningful hypotheses through rigorous research; (2) applied science, which focuses on practically significant problems; and (3) "action research," which integrates elements of both basic and applied science. The allegory concludes by advocating the unification of basic and applied science.*

Not-so-long-ago in a not-so-far-away land lived three little pigs. These three little pigs grew up in the same neighborhood, attended the same schools, and shared the same passion: houses. The three were fascinated by the various types of structures inhabited by pigs the world over, and they whiled away many a happy hour puzzling over the nature and design of such dwellings. They could think of nothing more meaningful than dedicating their lives to the scientific study of houses and the ways they can be improved and repaired.

As they grew older, however, the pigs gradually grew apart in values, beliefs, and goals. The first pig became intrigued with understanding how houses worked, and embarked on a systematic study of foundations, arches, doors, and windows. So he bought a big arm chair in which to sit in his straw house and develop theory. He converted his pig pen into an elaborate laboratory where he could test out hypotheses, and erected a large sign for all to see. The sign read: Scientific Pig. Using his armchair and laboratory, he developed a particularly interesting theory about round houses that had no windows or doors. Although no one had found any of these houses, other scientifically minded pigs thought the work was interesting.

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*Author's Note:* This paper is based on an allegory presented at the 10th Annual Meeting of the Society of Southeastern Social Psychology, November 1987, in Athens, Georgia. Thanks are extended to Leo Simonetta, Steve Danish, and Mark Leary for their help in writing the allegory.

Leary, M. R. (Ed.) (1988). The state of social psychology. [Special issue]. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 1988, Vol. 3, No. 2, 63-65.

The second pig was also interested in the theory behind houses, arches and doorways. The second pig, however, wanted to use this knowledge to improve houses; to repair misshapen houses and possibly make houses of tomorrow better than houses of today. So this pig put a sign in front of his pen that read "Practical Pig," and began helping other pigs build and repair their houses. Soon, practical pig had made so much money that he could afford to build a breathtakingly beautiful house of sticks on a large tract of land in the country.

What, in the meantime, was the third pig doing? Well, it seems that he too was trying diligently to understand the nature of houses. Although scientific pig and practical pig only spoke to one another once a year at their annual reunion, the third pig often visited each one to talk about houses and ideas for improving them. When Scientific Pig would describe his studies of round houses, the third pig would ask what the studies say about the structural dynamics of houses in general. And when Practical Pig would talk about building houses out of sticks, the third pig would ask why sticks rather than stone? After many conversations and much research on houses, the third pig managed to build a house that, though it lacked the beauty of Practical Pig's house, was more useful than the round houses that the Scientific Pig studied.

One day a pig-hungry wolf came to town. When he came to the first pig's pen the wolf said, "I am hungry, and must have a pig for breakfast."

Scientific Pig, rising up from his arm chair said, "Why eat me? Can't you see the long-term importance of my work on round houses?"

"No," answered the wolf as he bit off the poor Scientific Pig's head.

You see, although the first pig had fashioned a marvelous round house of straw and mortar with strong arches and walls, it had no window or doors. It was a fine model to be used for testing predictions about houses, but it didn't protect him from the wolf. The third pig had warned him that building houses with doors would yield both better data as well as safety from predators, but he hadn't heeded his friend's warnings.

Sadly, the second pig was also eaten, for although he had built what seemed to be a safe house, Practical Pig decided to use sticks for the walls. Although the first pig had found that "weightbearing, rigid barriers fashioned from the woody fibers of trees and shrubs can be rendered dis cohesive through exposure to focused atmospheric air pressure of excessive magnitude," the Practical Pig felt that the first pig's studies were so artificial that they didn't have any relevance for "real" houses. In fact, he had let his subscription to the *Journal for Purely Scientific Pigs* (or, *JPSP*) lapse, so he didn't even know about the problems with sticks. So when the wolf huffed and puffed and blew, the house tumbled down and the second pig fell victim.

The third pig survived (of course). When he saw the wolf approach, he ran into his house and locked the door. The wolf pushed on the house, but the foundation and structure were too strong. He tried blowing on the house, but the stone walls held secure. He tried climbing on the roof, but the carefully crafted masonry gave him no purchase. The hungry wolf, relenting, then left the third pig in peace.

The moral of the story is taken from the monument that the third pig erected to the memory of his departed childhood friends. It read:

Knowledge cannot prosper  
When science is one-sided,  
The basic and applied must be,  
United, not divided.

(Postscript: It should also be noted that although the third pig mourned the passing of his two friends, he was glad to finally get control of the editorial boards of the leading journals in the field.)