

Pseudoscientific Seminars: Counterfeit Chiropractic

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In the 60s, weekend seminar pseudoscientific group "therapy" became a major form of entertainment in California. People were primal screaming at the top of their lungs, smashing pillows at each other with foam boffing sticks, rolling around naked in Wesson oil, hypnotically "regressing" themselves to "former lives," and enduring 48-hour non-stop marathon group sessions. All this may seem a little silly today but the real long range effects in California were not so funny. The frequent appearance of these pseudoscientific seminars in Hollywood movies and the news media denegated psychotherapy, so much in the public eye that severe reductions in mental health institutional facilities in California became acceptable to tax-conscious voters and to a governor who often confused what occurred in the movies with what was going on in the real world. The thousands of very real mentally ill and homeless, wandering the streets of California's cities today, are the pathetic legacy of those tragically unrealistic cutbacks.

About the only good thing to come out of the whole business was that real psychologists developed a useful understanding of the subtle methods such bogus seminars use to attract, manipulate, and hold participants: the signs and symptoms of pseudoscientific seminars.

In the area of pop psychology, the targeted victims of the phony seminars were the "patients," not the doctors, probably because psychologists are trained to recognize (and sometimes use!) these same sorts of manipulative methods. Since pseudoscientific seminars exist in many areas of human interest, I was not particularly surprised to find them in the world of chiropractic, as well. However, I was surprised to find that the targeted victims of pseudoscientific seminars in chiropractic are the doctors themselves, rather than their patients.

This state of affairs is totally incompatible with the efforts being put forth by the consortium and other legitimate research institutions to establish a scientific knowledge base in chiropractic. Fortunately, counterfeit seminars can only continue to exist if they are not recognized as such. What follows, so that they may be properly diagnosed, are the major signs and symptoms of a pseudoscientific seminar business.

1. Promises, Promises

All pseudoscientific seminars promise not just scientific information, but financial, mental, and/or spiritual power to participants, but if, and only if:

a. they "make a commitment," i.e. pay for the seminar; b. they "give it a chance to work," i.e. agree uncritically with everything presented.

2. Untested Hypotheses

There is a world of difference between what sounds like a good idea and what actually pans out. The speculative and superficial use of jargon from trendy new theories (e.g., chaos theory, fractals, quantum theory, etc.) is no substitute for empirically derived and supported models. Pseudoscientific seminars present a lot of great sounding ideas but inevitably do not clearly distinguish between what is merely a reasonable idea (i.e., an hypothesis), and what has actually been empirically tested and validated.

3. Unfalsifiable Hypotheses

Many pseudoscientific ideas are untestable, even in principle, i.e., the hypotheses is unfalsifiable. We must ask: Is it even possible to test this hypotheses? What kind of evidence would settle the question? What would show the idea to be false?

4. Unpublished Findings

If the hypotheses has actually been tested, were the findings made available to expert criticism by being published in a peer reviewed, indexed journal? Counterfeit science is printed usually in self-published books, workbooks, etc., not published in journals. Beware if there have been no scientific publications. If there have, what are the exact particulars of the study, e.g., what kind of patient population was used, was there a control group, etc.? Is the seminar using the findings properly?

5. Unanswered Questions

Bogus seminar moderators are charismatic, entertaining, enthusiastic, and know how to professionally "work the room" as well as any seasoned stand-up comic. These manipulative skills are used to control the audience and keep things moving briskly and according to a tight, prearranged schedule. Uncontrolled interaction with the audience is not tolerated. Question and answer periods at the end of the session are often promised but never seem to actually materialize. Troublesome questions, should they be unavoidable, are usually dealt with by a brief joke, often at the expense of the questioner, rather than by relevant substantive discussion. Uncontrollable or unenthusiastic participants are quietly asked to leave if they are a distraction.

6. Uncredited References

Although the names of a few very famous people are always sprinkled throughout the presentation, key ideas are never credited, even partially, to anyone else (After all, if you could get these ideas at the public library, why would you pay for them?). If there are any references cited at all, they will be quite unspecific, e.g., out-of-date textbooks, etc.

7. Uncontested Presentation

Research findings which do not agree with the hypothesis being presented (i.e., sold) are simply not acknowledged. A balanced picture is never presented.

8. Agreement Is Membership

The strategy employed by bogus moderators, to coerce uncritical agreement of seminar participants, is to imply that anyone who doesn't uncritically agree is necessarily a member of an undesirable (enemy) group; if you want to become (or remain) a member of a desirable in-group, you must uncritically agree.

9. Bashing the Opposition

The logic is that if you are different from someone who is wrong, you are necessarily right. Bogus moderators use this mistake in logic to gain agreement and also to coordinate the group. In chiropractic seminars, this means medical bashing to obtain feelings of superiority and group cohesion. Once such feelings are elicited, weak and/or unsupported ideas can be quickly inserted.

10. Cost

Probably the most easily identified sign of a pseudoscientific seminar is that it costs more than legitimate scientific conferences. For example, if the cost of attending a pseudoscientific seminar is \$400 for two days, and there are 100 participants, the gross income amounts to \$40,000 for the weekend. It is hard to imagine a justification for this sort of profit. The general rule would seem to be that pseudoscientific seminars cost at least twice as much as legitimate scientific conferences.

Here is an abbreviated list of all ten, along with a suggested question to ask for each:

1. Promises: Can I pay afterward?
2. Untested: How would you test that idea?
3. Unfalsifiable: What evidence would show that idea to be false?
4. Unpublished: Why hasn't this been published?
5. Unanswered Questions: Walk out.
6. Uncredited References: Is this really a new idea?
7. Uncontested Presentation: What studies have disagreed?
8. Agreement Is Membership: What do you feel are the major weak points of this approach?
9. Bashing: Their being wrong doesn't make this right.
10. Cost: Why does this program (seminar) cost so much?

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