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EDITORIAL

A reflection on today's environment for child and adolescent psychiatric research. The continuous march for science of European Child + Adolescent Psychiatry

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European Child + Adolescent Psychiatry (ECAP) is leaving late adolescence and youth behind; a recent editorial pointed to the founding of the Journal 25 years ago [1]. The end of the transition period into adulthood warrants a critical reflection on the current environment for scientific research and education with a particular focus on implications for youths across the world. The role of a scientific journal within this framework is worthwhile highlighting upon.

The aims of child and adolescent psychiatric research are to elucidate factors involved in mental disorders affecting young people and to improve diagnosis, treatment and prevention of such conditions. The science necessary to achieve these goals relies on several different disciplines which cover the whole range between basic and applied clinical science. As in any other medical/scientific field, we are sieving the current literature to identify those studies that will impact clinical reasoning and decision making. Perhaps more than in other medical fields we are also dependent on current societal trends, many if not most of which have direct implications for youths.

On April 22 we witnessed the March for Science held in over 600 cities on six continents and welcomed by scientists in Antarctica [2]. According to the science communicator Cara Santa Maria, who was one of several emcees of the Washington D.C. rally "we are at a critical juncture. Science is under attack. The very idea of evidence and logic and reason is being threatened by individuals and interests with the power to do real harm." This threat has seemingly encroached upon us within a short period of time due to the rapid rise of populism in several countries throughout the world. However, the factors underlying this rise have been operative for many years and include issues rooted within the world of science.

The medium and longer term effects of this attack on science are hard to predict. They will obviously have a particular impact on children and adolescents, who are struggling to find their place in a globalized world, while being dependent on the adult world to provide them with guidance. Will they turn to education and science in particular as the means to improve their personal opportunities and to render this world a better habitat? And who will provide this education and according to what premises? And who will define the science that these children are to be taught?

Currently, private schools form an established pillar of school education in many countries. Interestingly, it appears that worldwide—including albeit at small numbers China and Russia (see [3])—an increasingly large number of parents are seeking to provide their children with homeschooling, which has even been considered as the "smartest way to teach kids in the 21st century" [4]. In parallel to this demand, judiciary efforts are being pursued to grant parents the right to home school their children. In the US, figures for homeschooling have increased by 100% between 1999 and 2012; 3.4% (1,733,000 pupils) of the school-age (5–17 years) population was homeschooled in the 2011–2012 school year. Major parental reasons for home schooling included a concern about the environment of other schools (91%), desires to provide religious (64%), moral instruction (77%) and a nontraditional approach to child's education (44%), and dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools (74%). A physical or mental health problem was given as a major reason by 15% [5].

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In Germany, where schooling is mandatory, parents who refuse to send their children to school and instead offer home schooling are subject to fines and imprisonment. However, the European Court of Human Rights has agreed to review a German family's case and to assess if Germany's actions has breached the right to family life protected under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights; a decision is expected during the upcoming months [6]; in 2006 the Court had ruled that there is no right to homeschooling. In 2014, Germany's Constitutional Court justified restrictions on homeschooling, because the government has a compelling interest in preventing the formation of religious or ideological parallel societies. Furthermore, school attendance would allow youths the good of interacting with other children, who may think differently than themselves. In contrast to this restrictive stance pursued in Germany, the UK government has published online "Elective Home Education. Guidelines for local authorities" [7]. The ministerial foreword recognizes "that parents have the right to choose to educate their child at home rather than at school."

It seems not too far-fetched to postulate an overlap of societal factors responsible for the increments in rates of homeschooling and the 'attack on science'. Evidently, both science and education systems are being viewed more critically. The rights of parents to choose the way their children are educated are seemingly being upheld; in this context an 'objective' basis for what is perceived as the ideal education for children and adolescents is becoming less clear—the children's voice cannot make itself heard. Apparently, diversity as defined by adults is the key word to explain the co-existence of different educational settings, which can pursue different educational goals. Similarly, in science objectivity seems to be making way to different objectivities.

Evidence based research depends on the solid delineation of the underlying aims. Furthermore, we need to somehow prioritize distinct research venues and methods via which we produce results. Whereas at any given time point we seemingly have a good grip on our science, we need to realize that this grip is not constant over time. What was deemed scientifically relevant 25 years ago, is no longer necessarily a top priority today. Resources are limited and thus require consent as to their allocation. Effect sizes of most genetic and environmental risk factors are small raising the question as to the amount of money to be spent on their identification. Randomized controlled trials are expensive, too, and in many cases novel therapies have proven no better than established treatments.

The 'attack on science' partly reflects this cumbersome process required to establish evidence based best practice. Exciting novel treatments, which gain rapid recognition, rarely pop up in our field, only a subgroup of which is generated by hard core science. Furthermore, the young age of our patients entails that we must take particular efforts to minimize the effect of potential long term side effects. We are confronted with historical challenges and societal trends that may require a rapid allocation of resources in an attempt to decide if such a challenge or trend merits our attention and the initiation of scientific research. The rapid influx of young refugees into several countries is the major example of such an historical challenge, which requires us to establish the best way(s) of dealing with mental health issues of youths whose upbringing and culture including religion differs substantially from our own. As for a societal trend, it would not appear too surprising to witness an increase of mental health research into the risks and benefits of homeschooling as a consequence of the ongoing upswing of this form of education. Who knows—homeschooling may even be propagated as a means to particularly help children with specific mental disorders. The UK Guidelines for Local Authorities for home education already states that the "parents' right to educate their child at home applies equally where a child has special education needs".

Obviously, scientists themselves are not exempt from becoming enmeshed in societal trends and traps. We are dependent on success largely defined by the number of papers we write, the respective impact factors and the amount of funding we successfully apply for. In comparison, the contents and implications of our research appear less important. At times it may even seem that a 'hot topic' can derail our long term efforts to work on a specific question within a specific field. It has become so much easier to rate scientists by numbers than to (attempt to) assess the qualitative aspects and impact of their work. Our seemingly ever increasing work load fosters this reductionistic approach. An increasing amount of time is devoted to our promotion of a positive scientific self-image in modern social and research media. Like it or not, many grant institutions require us to address political issues on top of dealing with the 'true science'; the bureaucratic requirements are starting to become insurmountable for those researchers who do not have a whole research and administrative support team behind them. It sometimes is helpful to take a step back; we should not get too uptight, if people criticize science; science is not THE truth. While we as researchers certainly thrive on the cognitive paradigm, culture, religion and spirituality are essential aspects of human mankind, too.

Scientific journals are in the midst of this complex scenario. Critically, editors decide what research is published and what research is not published. They base their decisions on the evaluations performed within the peer-review system and thus critically depend on reviewers, who are

leaders within the respective research field with their own interests, investments and opinions. Apart from the impact factor, the role of a journal has become less important; most readers nowadays are holding pdfs of a particular article of interest in their hands instead of a whole journal. The trend towards online publishing has greatly accelerated this process and at the same time is ensuring that the knowledge inherent to such an article can immediately be accessed around the world. The search for the 'right' publication strategy applies to individual authors as well as to journals and publishing houses. Importantly, the rules of a free and globalized market apply to publishing houses, too.

As the current Editor-in-Chief of ECAP in ever changing times I would like to make use of the 25th anniversary by thanking all of our editors, our reviewers, the staff of Springer Nature and finally and most importantly our readers. It is our endeavor to continue our march for science to improve the lot of children and adolescents with mental disorders and to propagate the societal importance of mental health issues in young age; we acknowledge the difficulties and uncertainties inherent to this process.

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