

NZPsS Conference - The case for letting theory go...

Past NZ Psychological Society Presidents vs Students debate

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Searching for meaning and understanding is central to human experience. We generate belief systems and theories to explain our world, but our beliefs and explanations don't always stand up to scrutiny. Human history is littered with discarded beliefs and theories, from the belief that the world is flat, to the phrenologists belief that personality traits can be predicted from the shape of one's skull. Reflecting on the history of science, renowned English biologist, T H Huxley, observed in his 1870 Presidential Address to the British Association that "The great tragedy of science (is) the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact".

What is the state of theory-making in our own discipline? Freda Walker concluded that our Grand theories have failed, and the challenge is now to "recycle the good and robust bits of past theories and test and retest them in the light of emerging evidence". Barry Parsonson, a.k.a. 'The Bard', then reviewed for us, in his compelling *Grim Theory-tale*, the theoretical detritus which has accumulated in psychology. Barry's assessment of theory-making in psychology could only be described as ad-verse, if you'll pardon the play on words. In their classic text for psychology students, *Theories of Personality*, Hall and Lindzey concluded half a century ago that there is no single sovereign theory to guide our discipline, a conclusion which still holds true today.

Philosopher George Santayana has been credited with saying that "those who do not learn (from) history are doomed to repeat it." So how can we learn from the past to create the psychology of the future? Psychological theories are belief systems, cultural delusions if you will. The justification for such theories is the challenge they provide either to build on them or discard them. In the course of our development as a discipline, we have perhaps over-valued theories, at least those which offer the allure of all-encompassing explanations of human experience and behavior.

As we moved from philosophy and the humanities to model ourselves and our methodologies on the physical sciences we adopted a reductionist approach, focusing on whatever can be observed experimentally and measured statistically. This was understandable in a comparatively young and evidence-based discipline. However, many of the social, cultural, and environmental challenges facing society today, including the so-called “wicked problems” which defy easy resolution, are not easily addressed using our traditional theories and research tools. And living as we do in an electronic age adds new complexities, new opportunities, and new risks, for us and for society.

Faced with these challenges, we have broadened our psychological focus over recent decades, asking ourselves “how can we as psychologists contribute most usefully to the well-being of humankind?” We have developed new tools and intervention strategies, and new collaborative initiatives. This broadening focus affirms not our plethora of theories, but the core values which drive us, including a commitment to respect and empower others, and an evidence-based approach to all we do. Such values endure, whereas theories may not.

Theories have played an important part in our development as a discipline, and will continue to do so. They have an important place in our toolbox but are only useful if we are prepared to discard them once they have reached their use-by date. Not to let them go will limit our ability to move from the past to address the challenges of the future.