

Diversity as a Must-Have Feature of Science

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Enrique W. Neblett, Jr., issues a call to embrace a manifesto for diverse psychological science.

Inspired by APS Fellow Richard McFall's "Manifesto for a Science of Clinical Psychology" published in 1991, Neblett, an associate professor of clinical psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, suggested his own Cardinal Principle — that the only acceptable and legitimate form of psychological science is one that incorporates diversity.

Neblett was among a panel of researchers who gathered at the 2016 APS Annual Convention in Chicago to discuss how psychological scientists can conduct research that recognizes and incorporates diversity in all its forms.

Building upon key points made by APS Fellow Robert M. Sellers at the 2015 convention, Neblett argued that psychological science must truly capture the breadth of human experiences, consider and examine diversity in subjects and among scientists themselves, and forge a membership and leadership structure that itself reflects all the diversity of the populations the scientists endeavor to study.

This builds on a rising call in the field for research that moves beyond the typical subject pools, which often consist of undergraduate students and others who represent only a thin slice of the humanity pie in terms of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and other factors that contribute to their worldviews and experiences.

Understanding Indigenous Populations

One of the most striking examples of the need for cultural understanding in a therapeutic context is in the Native American population, where mental health inequities, poverty, and substance abuse persist at high rates.

APS Fellow Joseph P. Gone, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, described the postcolonial predicament of indigenous people: Many of them live in poverty and are in urgent need of mental health services, but they find the majority of clinical services available to them to be assimilative and otherwise incongruous with indigenous culture.

To bridge this gap, clinical scientists have tended to adapt existing mainstream interventions for use in servicing indigenous peoples, Gone said. However, he advocates the harnessing of local healing traditions that might be tailored for community-based mental health services.

Gone established one such community-based research partnership with the Crystal Creek Lodge, a

residential substance abuse treatment program administered by the Blackfeet Indian tribe in Browning, Montana. Together, they created a treatment model involving a summer cultural-immersion camp run not by mental health professionals but by members of the Blackfeet tribe who specialize in cultural and ceremonial matters. Clients with substance abuse problems learned traditional skills and cultural practices and participated in Blackfeet rituals and ceremonies.

Gone stressed the preliminary nature of this approach's success and explained that many questions about the effectiveness of these types of programs — and even the ability to scientifically assess their effectiveness — still need to be answered. However, he believes that treatments that are derived directly from Native cultures rather than adapted to them may offer a more resonant, and ultimately more successful, treatment path for members of indigenous populations.

“Many indigenous cultures assert that ‘Our culture is our treatment,’” he said, “and the overlooked cultural and political values of such interventions suggest that these could be broadly therapeutic.”

Gender-Discrimination Research

Although many issues of diversity relate to ethnicity, APS Board Member Michelle R. “Mikki” Hebl, a professor of psychology at Rice University, explained that gender looms large in this domain as well.

Hebl showed that despite some indications that gender discrimination has decreased or at least stabilized, gender discrimination still occurs in profound ways. As an example, she cited a 2012 randomized double-blind study in which university researchers rated applications for a lab manager position from a fictitious individual with either a male or a female name. Both male and female faculty participants rated the male applicant as more competent and hireable than the identically qualified female applicant. These participants also selected higher salaries for and offered more career mentoring to the male applicants.

However, such prejudices often emerge in more implicit ways, and the more covert instances of gender discrimination are where Hebl focuses much of her research. In a study examining recommendation letters for academic positions, Hebl and her colleagues found that women tended to be described using more communal words such as “caring” and “sensitive,” whereas men were given more agentic descriptions such as “strong” and “independent.” She noted that the difference might not necessarily be a bad thing were it not for their additional finding that letters with more communal descriptions were judged more negatively.

“So these ostensibly very small differences can make big changes,” she explained.

Letters for female candidates also included more so-called “doubt-raisers” — qualifiers like “may be” and “has potential” — and even in fields and university departments with relative gender parity, invitations to present seminars were found to be extended to female academics far less often than to males.

Hebl implored the audience to continue research on these issues both domestically and internationally, including employing diverse research approaches that incorporate non-Western practices and cultural norms. She specifically addressed the need for more men to get involved, as her own research has shown

that males are more responsive to gender issues when men point them out compared with when women do.

Reframing Sexual Orientation

Sometimes misconceptions about diversity can have long-lasting consequences. Such is the case when it comes to sexual orientation, according to Lisa M. Diamond, a professor of developmental psychology at The University of Utah.

Diamond reviewed previous psychological perspectives on sexual orientation, which tended to characterize it as a trait that is present from birth, targets one's desires to exclusively same-sex or opposite-sex individuals, and is stable over time. These views — especially the way in which they limit sexual orientation to exclusively heterosexual or exclusively homosexual — have inherently shaped the subsequent research paradigms on sexual orientation and even framed how policy debates surrounding it have functioned, Diamond said.

However, recent data on the subject of sexuality have dispelled many of these notions. Using results from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Diamond explained that not all individuals with same-sex attractions experienced them from an early age; the age of expression of same-sex attractions varied widely across the 20,000 participants. It also varied across time, in contrast with the prevailing belief that sexual orientation is a fixed trait. In fact, only 0.3% of female and male respondents expressed same-sex attractions through the entire course of the 13-year study. Many more — 19% of women and 14% of men — showed same-sex attractions at some points in the study but not throughout. Subsequent comparable studies have found similar results.

“So what we’ve thought of as atypical is actually normative,” Diamond explained.

It follows, then, that nonexclusive attraction — the research term for bisexuality — is much more common than we tend to think: 95% of women and 79% of men in the National Survey of Family Growth, the massive longitudinal study used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, expressed same-sex attractions that were nonexclusive — that is, they did not report having only same-sex attractions.

“If you’re shocked, you should be shocked,” Diamond said.

She attributes our gross misconceptions to early models of sexual orientation that were largely based on poorly sampled surveys. With the latest data, she says, scientists can more accurately characterize sexual orientation to ensure that all sexual minorities, including those who do not claim a particular orientation at all, are represented in research and policy.

Toward a Manifesto of Diversity Science

Neblett emphasized the need for doctoral training programs to produce culturally humble scientists who can be aware of the limits of their cultural knowledge and cultivate a cultural sensitivity and openness, rather than pursuing an unrealistically deep understanding of every possible culture.

Neblett pointed to the steps taken at his own university to address this issue, including targeted hiring efforts and a Diversity Training Committee tasked with promoting open dialogue, developing cultural awareness among trainees, and creating a training plan and sequence to specifically address issues of diversity and cultural competence. This multiyear plan builds from a multicultural orientation that culminates in a multicultural case conference during students' fourth or fifth years.

Neblett called upon all in the field to fully integrate diversity into research rather than treating it as a specialized topic.

"The future of psychological science depends on our ability to thoughtfully and meaningfully integrate diversity into the field," he said. "Psychological scientists have a moral and ethical responsibility to pursue and promote diverse psychological science as the only legitimate and acceptable form of psychological science."

References

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