

The Either/Or of Psychological Science: A Reflection

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This article is part of a series commemorating APS's 25th anniversary in 2013.

In David Lodge's book *Therapy*, the main character, Tubby Passmore, turns to Kierkegaard's book *Either/Or* to find understanding of his past, a sense of his present, and hope for the future. Tubby is particularly attracted to the essay called "The Unhappiest Man" because it sets out how such a person is never present to themselves, but rather always living in the past or in the future. Always either remembering or hoping. Either thinking things were better in the past or hoping they'll be better in the future. Tubby reflects on how well this fits him. He worries about making decisions because he is guarding against things turning out badly. He hopes they'll turn out well, but if they do turn out well he hardly notices because he has made himself miserable imagining how they could turn out badly. If they do turn out badly in some unforeseen way, then that only confirms his underlying belief that the worst misfortunes are unexpected.

One risk of any reflection on 25 years of psychological science is that it is too easy to become like Tubby. One can find things (and these things may be different for each of us) that were better "back then" or that will be better "in the future." One can also find things (and again these may be different for each of us) that are either very different or very similar now to how they were in the past and to how they likely will be in the future, or things that didn't turn out as one would have hoped. The science of any discipline is precise eventually, but often messy, ambiguous, and uncomfortable in its development along the way. And so it has been for psychological science.

That said, I'm not an unhappy man about psychological science (the Association for Psychological Science has played a role in helping me remain happy), but there are aspects for us to be excited about and to be concerned about. This reflection comments on some of those aspects. I comment briefly on the science of psychological science, on the application of psychological science, and on international psychological science.

The Science of Psychological Science

As we know, psychological science seeks to discover, describe, and explain psychological phenomena and processes through the logic and method of science. Over the last 25 years, most of us (at least in Western countries) have become more confident and less self-conscious in both believing and asserting that basic tenet of our discipline. Let me add, however, that this basic tenet is sometimes hard to see in the application of psychological science. We are the only scientific discipline that links together the domains of biology, cognition, behavior, and social interaction. The rich array of scientific activity within and among these domains, as well as the interaction with cognate disciplines, is the essence of our identity as a discipline. Although that sometimes leads to tension, it is a creative tension that must be maintained for psychological science to continue growing and delivering to society in a distinctive way.

Over the last 25 years, much of our theoretical and empirical work has become more fine-grained and nuanced about the interactions of variables, and we have let go of the once-felt need for grand theories. In many areas of psychological investigation, we are now sophisticated enough to look for the complex interactions that are occurring, rather than searching solely for the dominant variable of influence. Psychological science is now, more so than ever before, about nuanced theorizing that recognizes the complexity of human experience and behavior. Although that is a positive, it is also the case that over the last 25 years, some of us have succumbed too much to the seductive appeal of technology and to a slide into biological reductionism, and that is a risk for the future as well. Of course it has been good to take advantage of technological advances, and of course there is likely a biological component of all of our thoughts, actions, and interactions, but we need to ensure that we do not confuse technological outputs with psychological theorizing, and that we do not forget all of the non-biological influences on human experience and behavior.

The Application of Psychological Science

Psychological science (again, at least in many Western countries) has played an increasingly important and visible role in shaping the adaptation of people to the events of influence that impinge on them and their role in society. Each of us can point to various positive applications of psychological science in areas such as development and education across the life span, mental and physical health, employment and productivity, unemployment and retirement, and immigration and social change, as well as a number of other areas that are central to how individuals and communities function in pursuit of personal, social, and economic goals. Of course, many of these areas are far more likely to span the boundaries of multiple disciplines; but over the last 25 years, psychological science has more confidently and obviously taken its role in shaping relevant policy and implementing relevant practice in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

But there remains a problem in the “application of psychological science” that does not appear to have become less (and may have become more) pronounced over the last 25 years. This problem has at least two contributing factors that are difficult to know how to deal with. The first factor is that the inherent diversity of psychology may doom it to a life of ambiguity in the eyes of the public, especially those individuals and organizations that are in need of assistance. The second factor is that (too) many of those educated to become psychologists seem to forget the basic science tenet of the discipline and engage in belief-based enthusiasm rather than evidence-based practice. These two factors can bring together the gullible buyer and the gushing seller of “psychology” in ways that at best cause no harm (except a redistribution of wealth), but at worst cause harm to individuals, to organizations, and to the discipline/profession of psychology. This remains a problem in need of a solution, if only because the positive application of psychological science can be easily overwhelmed by the scent of snake oil.

International Psychological Science

I have indicated that psychological science has certain characteristics in Western countries. As someone who has (fortunately) travelled in various Asian countries over the last 25 years, psychology in both science and practice has not developed in that region as much as perhaps it could. The reasons for this are complex, of course, but as members of a global scientific and practitioner network, I would hope that more progress could be made, individually and organizationally, in international psychological science.

Rapidly developing and globally influential countries are too important to be left to old-fashioned psychology, and to dubious psychological practices imported from developed countries.

Societies in Asia (and many other regions) are being transformed and influenced by many processes and events, locally, regionally, and globally. Psychological science can and should be playing a stronger role in these rapidly developing regions. Perhaps I feel this strongly because as I write this in Australia, I'm closer to parts of Asia than I am to other parts of Australia. Helping psychological science develop sensibly and rapidly in developing countries is not a challenge we have taken up well enough over the last 25 years, but it is one that I hope we, either individually or collectively through organizations such as the Association for Psychological Science, take up in a more committed way in the future. We need to do this, if only because we need to not only be aware of and play a role in the changing nature of our own (Western) countries, but we also need to be aware of and play a role as psychological scientists in the countries with which we will be linked more closely in the future for our social and economic well-being.

Moving Forward

For those who have read this far, I hope that you've found some points of agreement or disagreement. From my perspective, the study of mind is the essential thread of psychological science that makes it all worthwhile, and that thread has become stronger over the last 25 years of our discipline. Looking to the next 25 years, I hope that the unrealized finding and the novel application are the essential excitements that continue to drive us. The exact way in which each of us as psychological scientists and each of the domains of psychological science move to the future will differ, of course. But perhaps we can learn a little from Tubby Passmore. After many false starts, various battles, and some failures, Tubby found that the best way to move toward his future was to quit worrying about it, and to simply keep moving. And that is what psychological science will do.