

Why Should Psychological Science Care About Diversity?

July 30, 2015

APS Fellow Robert M. Sellers has a novel way of encouraging psychological scientists to increase racial and ethnic diversity in their field: Make it all about the science.

“Diverse perspectives, in and of themselves, are just better,” he told the audience in an invited address at the 2015 APS Annual Convention in New York City. “Diversifying the pool of psychologists will have important benefits for all areas of psychological science. There’s growing research that suggests that functional diversity has an important benefit in two areas of intellectual endeavor: innovation and problem solving.”

Sellers, Charles D. Moody Collegiate Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan, has been working to include more individuals from underrepresented populations in psychological science during the course of his 3-decade career. He began his talk with a review of the current status of ethnic and racial minorities in psychological science, noting that although there have been modest improvements over the past few years, the field still falls short of its stated goal of bringing more underrepresented minorities into the fold.

According to the National Science Foundation’s National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics Survey of Earned Doctorates 1998–2013 tally, approximately 72% of psychology PhD recipients in 2013 were White, Sellers said. Furthermore, the same study shows that no minority group has made substantial positive progress in this area in the past 15 years, with numbers of Blacks and American Indians staying relatively flat while numbers of Asians and Hispanics have increased, albeit at slight and inconsistent rates. This disparity, he noted, continues into faculty positions, where American Indians, Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics combined make up only 15.9% of non-tenure-track faculty positions (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2013). These minorities fare equally badly in tenured positions, although a slight uptick of minorities in tenure-track positions may suggest a positive trend, said Sellers.

A 2010 *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* analysis of articles published in six of the field’s leading journals showed that 95% of all samples came from what the authors termed WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) societies — societies that, as Sellers noted, are not always racially or ethnically diverse. Furthermore, the authors found that in this examination, 68% of all US studies and 80% of studies from other countries used college students as research participants — again, a sample population that tends to further marginalize already underrepresented groups that are less likely to attend universities. The top 20 US psychology departments as ranked by *US News & World Report* have a median enrollment of less than 4% of Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians combined, despite those minorities constituting approximately 27.6% of the overall population (US Census Bureau, 2011), he said.

This problem, Sellers argued, illustrates why increasing diversity of all kinds should be a critical

objective for the field: “Psychological science must capture the full breadth of human experiences before it can truly say that it understands a particular psychological construct or phenomenon. If we are really trying to develop laws of human behavior, it’s extremely important that those laws ... be based on data that captures that variability, [so] the question of who we’re actually studying really is important as we begin to think about these generalized theories of human behavior.”

It’s also crucial for psychological scientists to broaden their horizons when choosing what to study, particularly as it relates to the multitude of ethnic and racial life experiences, said Sellers. He believes that there is insufficient focus on defining race, culture, and ethnicity and on exploring how those concepts shape and inform worldviews.

“It’s not just enough to know that behavior varies,” he added. “If we really are engaged in a scientific enterprise, we want to understand how and why.”

However, a formidable obstacle blocks progress in this endeavor, said Sellers: “As [our field is] currently constructed, we are in no way or shape prepared to do so in a way that wouldn’t do damage ... we must do so in a way that is [culturally] informed.” He suggested psychological scientists may find this task challenging because they are taught to think and work objectively, which may not be possible in the examination of human behavior.

“It’s very difficult for one to think about how, as human beings, we can actually study human beings from an objective perspective,” he said. Instead, it might be helpful to adopt a framework that values perspective, and most importantly a variety of perspectives, rather than objectivity.

“In thinking about the way in which we do work,” he added, “it’s not our goal to try to be objective. It’s to try to understand the perspective that we bring to bear and to both value that perspective and put it in context when we begin to make judgments about the things that we’re studying.”

Sellers gave the example of encountering someone with a noticeable scar. In this scenario, he said, we have two options: make assumptions about that person based solely on the scar and no further knowledge — in which case we might pity her — or ask the person about it, in which case we might learn something more about the individual that informs our perspective of her. Although this is a physical rather than psychological example, the same holds true for examining differences in people’s psyches: Asking about or measuring these differences methodologically will provide a more complete analysis than simply making assumptions without input from the people themselves.

To aid these endeavors, psychological scientists should examine not only the diversity of their subjects but also the diversity of their colleagues, Sellers urged. “If we’re going to diversify our samples, then it’s very important that we have individuals in play who understand something about the experience of the people that we’re studying.”

Sellers cautioned, however, that researchers must make an effort to preserve — and indeed, celebrate — the unique perspectives that racial and ethnic minorities bring to their field: “If we’re only training individuals to think like us, then we’ve lost the advantage of diversity. It’s not just about bringing in people we’ve historically not brought in, but it’s also about listening to them, and listening to the ways in which they understand the world, and trying to incorporate that in the way in which we think about

human behavior.”

Some of the concrete ways of implementing such alterations — changing who is studied by whom and how we study them — would involve minimal effort and make a great deal of difference, said Sellers. For example, all psychology journals could require that articles provide information about the racial and ethnic makeup of their samples. As an example, he noted that approximately 85% of *Psychological Science* articles currently do not mention race or ethnicity at all: “All articles should be forced to address the issues of generalizability [and] talk about how the study relates to different groups.”

Organizations also should make efforts to track the racial and ethnic status of their members, which Sellers acknowledged might be a more complicated endeavor. However, he added, “I think we all know, as psychologists, that one indicator of whether or not you care about something is whether or not you measure it.”

In the same vein, Sellers said all psychology organizations should ensure that underrepresented minorities are included at all levels of leadership — a conscious decision that will not happen organically, he added. He lauded the formation of the APS Diversity Committee, which is currently working to assess the diversity of APS membership across all dimensions to determine how the association can best represent and advance the field of psychological science. These measures, he concluded, would set the field on the right path to increasing racial and ethnic minority representation in all areas of psychological science. And in the end, he said, that’s just good science.

References and Further Reading

Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, 61–83. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>

National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2013). *Baccalaureate origins of US-trained S&E doctorate recipients* [NSF Publication No. 13-323]. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/infbrief/nsf13323/nsf13323.pdf>

National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. (2013). *Survey of earned doctorates, 1998–2013* [NSF Publication No. 15-304]. Retrieved from <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates/>

US Census Bureau. (2011, September). *2010 Census of Population and Housing. 2010 Census summary file 1: Technical documentation*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/sf1.pdf>