

Current Trends in Psychology

Christopher Koch, Ph.D.
George Fox University

Several myths about the status of psychology have emerged in recent years. For instance, there is a myth that there are fewer scientific psychologists graduating with doctoral degrees than ever before. However, Fowler (2001a) indicates that the number of graduating scientific psychologists has actually increased over the last 25 years. An interesting trend is that the rate of growth is greater in applied areas of psychology than in other areas. Fowler (2001a) notes that the applied areas of psychology have been behind in their development and that the growth in those areas represents a “catching up.” In fact, the application of psychology has created greater opportunities for psychologists. Being a psychologist no longer limits you to clinical or academic work. Psychologists today are presented with a wide variety of careers to choose from (Fowler, 2001b). An excellent resource to study the different areas that psychologists are finding employment is the February 2001 issue of the Monitor on Psychology. In that issue, 21 psychologists are highlighted in careers ranging from marketing analysts to internet developers to directors of various interest organizations. Another useful resource is the Psychological Science Agenda which is published by the Science Directorate of the American Psychological Association. A different career in psychology is highlighted in each issue of the Psychological Science Agenda.

The growing popularity of psychology and possibilities for psychologists that have arisen from the growing popularity makes psychology an interesting and exciting discipline. Below are some of the current trends in the field of psychology. However, before presenting these trends, I need to make a disclaimer. Psychology is a very broad discipline. Some psychologists work in schools. Some are clinicians. Some conduct what many would consider biological research. Other psychologists design software or instrumentation panels. The list can go on and on. Likewise, there is a great deal of diversity in psychological thought. Therefore, the following comments present some of the recent trends in psychology that I find to be significant. It is not a conclusive list of current trends but should provide a good overview of the changes that are taking place in psychology.

Applied Psychology

As noted above, applied psychology is enjoying a relatively large growth rate. Psychological principles are employed in marketing. Industrial/Organizational psychologists are being used in varying capacities in the business world. However, the area of applied psychology that is growing the fastest is health psychology. Health psychology focuses on the promotion and maintenance of health, the prevention and treatment of illness, the identification of etiologic and diagnostic correlates of health, illness and related dysfunction, and the analysis and improvement of the health care system and health policy information (Stone, 1987; Matarazzo, 1982). An important aspect of health psychology is that it deals with both prevention and treatment. Thus, some health psychologists may help people maintain a fitness program while others deal with life after diagnosis. Oncology is one area of medicine that is actively using psychologists to help patients deal with cancer treatment. Health psychology is an exciting area in psychology with great potential for future psychologists.

Another area of applied psychology is psychological testing. Our society tends to measure everything. Baseball is a great example of our need to measure since there is a statistic for everything associated with baseball. Educational attainment and intelligence are among the things we like to measure. In fact, one of the first applications of psychology was the development of the Army Alpha and Beta tests which were essentially IQ tests given to place soldiers in positions appropriate for their abilities. Many academic accrediting agencies and insurance companies have become very outcome oriented. Therefore, tests are in demand. Within testing, an interesting trend in intelligence testing is to minimize the verbal nature of tests. This has come about largely for two reasons. First, many have argued that intelligence tests are written using assumptions from one social class and, therefore, are not generalizable to people from other social classes and racial or ethnic groups. The second concern is that the United States has an increasing minority population. It is recognized by test developers that it may be unfair to test children or adults who speak English as a second language with a test that was written for speakers of English. Although performance on these tests still tends to be correlated with verbal ability, the trend represents the goal to develop a culturally fair test of intelligence.

Public Policy

There has been an increased emphasis over the last several years to both promote psychology and to inform policy makers by providing psychological research on matters important to the general public. Dr. Richard McCarty, the Executive Director for Science at the Science Directorate of the American Psychological Association, referred to this as giving psychology away (McCarty, 2001). For instance, class sizes have become a growing concern. In fact, in the state of California, it was mandated that class sizes should be limited to only 20 students. Does limiting class size significantly improve student outcomes? Ehrenberg et al. (2001) found that reducing class size in early grades can have a long-lasting positive impact, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the question still remains as to whether or not decreasing class size by hiring less effective teachers is beneficial to those students who are taught by less effective teachers. Therefore, Ehrenberg et al. (2001) suggest that additional research using a variety of methodologies should be conducted in order to more thoroughly understand the impact of class size on student outcomes. Similarly, psychological research is being used to inform public policy makers in regard to issues associated with aging, children, youth, and families, disabilities, ethnic minorities, HIV/AIDS, lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues, urban initiatives, and women's issues. The Public Policy Office of the American Psychological Association is also involved in violence prevention, aging, and the Healthy Adolescents Project. The American Psychological Society recently started a new journal, Psychological Science in the Public Interest, to address issues of public interest from a psychological science perspective.

Evolutionary Psychology

Different schools of thought have dominated psychology at different points in time. The growing interest in evolutionary psychology may be an indicator that evolutionary psychology will be one of the main schools of thought in psychology in the very near future. Interestingly, Darwin (18xx) himself predicted that evolutionary thought would provide a new foundation for psychology emphasizing acquiring cognitive processes with the capacity to graduate. Today, evolutionary psychology can be defined as an approach to psychology that is "explicitly informed by evolutionary knowledge and reasoning (Dess, 2001, p. 14)." This approach is currently guiding research in empathy, conflict monitoring, cross-cultural psychology, and emotion regulation. Only time will let us know the extent to which evolutionary psychology influences all areas of psychology.

Research Methods

A key concept taught in every general psychology is that psychology is a science. For example, Lefton (2000) defines psychology as "the science of behavior and mental processes (p. 3)." Even the American Psychological Society defines psychology as "the study of mind and behavior (APA, 2000)." Because psychology is a science, the scientific method is stressed in a variety of psychology courses. Undergraduate psychology majors are also required to take courses in statistics and research methods since those courses help build the foundation for understanding and contributing to the science of psychology. There are several trends in research that may either improve the science of psychology or detract from it. Internet. The internet has provided greater access to research. Publishers have begun placing the table of contents of journals online with the full articles available to subscribers. Several publishers also use alerting services that send email updates about new publications. In addition, there are several excellent databases (e.g., PsychInfo, ERIC) online which aid the literature review process.

The internet is also providing a new outlet for scholarly work. For instance, the American Psychological Association has developed an online journal called Prevention & Treatment. This is one of the few online refereed journals. Since this format provides a relatively short submission to print time and potentially greater availability of research findings, more publishers may move to an online journal format in the future as long as a high standard of scholarship can be maintained.

Finally, the internet is beginning to become a tool in data collection. Researchers are able to place questionnaires online either on their own or by using specially designed web sites or software. Online experiments are also possible. PsychExperiments is an excellent site for online experiments that can be used as classroom demonstrations or for actual research purposes. Various software packages also make use of the efficiency of the internet. For example, SuperLab allows researchers to design a study, save the experiment, and email it to another researcher from within the SuperLab window. The internet allows researchers greater access to archived data sets for secondary analysis as well.

These benefits of the internet, along with political changes in numerous countries over the last decade, the increased interest in cross-cultural psychology, and the influence of post-modernism have helped initiate the globalization of psychology. As pointed out by Hebert (2000), one of the key issues in psychology for the next few years is how well American psychology connects with the rest of the world. Since American psychology has led the world in psychological research for many years, it has generally discarded work done in other countries unless the work was published in English and in American journals. Therefore, it is important for psychologists in the United States to continue the advancement of psychological research but in a manner that is well integrated with the work of psychologists around the world.

Imaging and Computer Modeling. Technology has enhanced the research process beyond the dissemination of research findings and increased efficiency in data collection. Technology has made it possible to obtain high resolution pictures (i.e., MRI) of the brain that allow researchers to determine the areas of the brain involved in certain cognitive processes.

Computer modeling not only aids our conceptual understanding of cognitive processes (e.g., using the computer as an analogy to the brain when developing theories) but can also have practical applications. For instance, psychological research on object recognition has been used in developing the scanning systems for stores to keep track of inventory and cost of items. Research stemming from neural network modeling, in which various cognitive processes are simulated using a hypothetical network of processing nodes analogous to neural pathways in the brain, has been used to increase the efficiency of mechanical systems by automating human decision making regarding the operation of the systems. Perhaps my favorite example of this is using a neural network model of decision making to adjust the jets which keep satellites in their proper orbits. Failure of a single jet can disrupt a satellite's orbit and a disrupted orbit results in interrupted service. Adjusting jets on the satellite to maintain the proper orbit while compensating for a failed jet requires a series of complicated mathematical calculations. Although people can do this task, this task is ideally suited for a computer which can perform the calculations faster. The neural network model can guide the computer in determining which jets to adjust in a manner similar to people while making the calculations thereby producing the correct solution but in a significantly less amount of time.

Questionnaires. Bornstein (2001) recently examined the types of dependent measures commonly used in psychological research. He found that questionnaires were used in 65% of the studies surveyed and that questionnaires were the only measure in 40% of all studies surveyed. In comparison, behavioral measures were used in 27% of the studies surveyed and performance measures were used in 30%. These three types of dependent measures were by far the most commonly used. The next most frequently used measures, interviews, diagnoses, and physiological measures, were each used in 9% of the studies. Although questionnaires provide a relatively easy way to gather information, there are several problems associated with questionnaires. For instance, questionnaires need to be psychometrically sound. Therefore, questionnaires should be properly developed before being used in research. This may prolong the research process or compromise research integrity if it is not done. Further, questionnaires often rely on participants recalling past information. The difficulty with this aspect of questionnaires is that it is difficult to determine the accuracy of responses. To further complicate the matter, respondents can respond in a manner consistent with the implied purpose of the questionnaire instead of answering the items as honestly as possible. Biased responding will obviously jeopardize the accuracy and generalizability of the results. In spite of these concerns, questionnaires sometimes provide the best method for obtaining data. However, it is important that questionnaires are the best method for a particular research question instead of the easiest or most convenient. If psychologist increase their use of questionnaires as a research method, psychology may become a science of questionnaires (Bornstein, 2001). This would be unfortunate since psychologists had to struggle to validate psychology as a legitimate science for some time.

Summary

Psychology continues to grow as a discipline. The applications of psychology are also becoming widely apparent. These trends are very favorable for new psychologists because they offer a wide range of opportunities. Industrious students of psychology may find themselves on the cutting edge of psychological development and application. The future of psychology, however, may depend on how well psychology maintains its scientific roots while meeting the needs of the public and adapting to a changing technological world.

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