

Conference Review: Finnish Social Psychology Conference: Social Psychology of History and History of Social Psychology

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Conference Review

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Finnish Social Psychology Conference: Social Psychology of History and History of Social Psychology

University of Helsinki, 17th-18th November 2017

The conference's historical theme provided an opportunity to reflect on the origins of social psychology, how the discipline has shaped to its current form and its future direction. This was apt for an event taking place in the centenary year of Finnish independence, a defining event in Finnish history allowing researchers to examine Finnish national identity.

The importance of history to social psychologists was emphasised in the keynote speeches by James Liu and Klaus Helkama. James Liu discussed the role of history in the formation of national identity. He stated that history was used as a symbolic reserve that involved collective remembering and forgetting (Liu & Hilton 2005). The drawing upon of history as a symbolic resource was discussed in relation to Finnish national identity and values. Klaus Helkama identified how events such as the 1905 Great Strike against Russia, the nation's ecology and religion influenced the development of Finnish values such as equality, privacy, national defence and the importance of nature. His research demonstrated that as support for national values increased, support for equality also increased (Helkama et al 2009).

In her keynote presentation, Sandra Schruijer discussed the history of social psychology and focused on how the cold war had shaped social psychology as a discipline. She talked about how World War 2 allowed social psychology to establish itself as a field and was viewed as a 'secret weapon' by the US in the cold war. Sandra Schruijer discussed the role of US funding influencing European social psychology (Schruijer 2012) and the importance of asking 'what if?'. In particular, would social identity theory and social representations be as influential in contemporary social psychology if Tajfel and Muscovici did not receive funding? This was a thought provoking talk that highlighted the influence of funding and politics on social psychological research.

The historical theme of the conference was continued in a seminar led by Satu Venäläinen and Rusten Menard on intersectionality, an approach that highlights the importance of historical context. Intersectionality is defined as the:

complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts (Brah and Phoenix 2004:76).

Venäläinen and Menard stated that whilst other fields such as sociology have incorporated intersectionality into their approach, its use by psychologists remains limited. Keshia D'silva demonstrated how intersectionality could be used in psychological research in her analysis of social representations of homosexuality in India. She discussed how homosexuality was presented as deviant in the colonial period to create conflict between the differing groups in

India and maintain British dominance. In contemporary India, lesbians were not recognised, as this challenged the representation of male national identity.

While the focus of the conference was focused on the history of social psychology, there was talk about the need for greater interdisciplinary work. Ulla Anttila emphasised the need for social psychologists to work more closely with peace psychologists. This presentation highlighted the importance of sustaining peace and the risk of increased violence as a result of climate change particularly in sub Saharan Africa (Witmer et al 2017).

The interest in Finnish national identity continued from Klaus Helkama's keynote presentation into the thematic sessions where Inari Sakki and Eemeli Hakokongas examined social representations in official Finnish centenary events. This research found that the events highlighted the importance of equality in representing Finland particularly in relation to the welfare state and multiculturalism. Given the importance of equality as a Finnish value, it was fitting that issues such as multiculturalism, inequality and prejudice were addressed in the conference presentations. My presentation on how the children of super-rich individuals use meritocratic arguments to support their non-meritocratic status was well received and I had interesting discussions about the importance of equality in Finnish society. Katarina Pettersson analysed the use of hate speech on Facebook and how they were used to celebrate ingroup prejudice in line with the final step of Reicher et al's (2008) Five-Step Social Identity model for the development of collective hate. When exploring talk about multiculturalism, Emma Nortio found that speakers both supported and questioned prejudicial posts about immigrants.

The conference demonstrated that Finnish social psychology is thriving and offers thought provoking research particularly to researchers exploring inequality. By organising a conference with a historical theme, there was an opportunity to reflect on how social psychology has been influenced by history and how this will shape the discipline's future.

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