

Sustainability in academia?

A couple of months ago, in the final stretch of my professional doctorate I went to two conferences in my field of health psychology. I had been on several occasions before to learn about developments in research and practice (it's always obvious what happens to be the hot topic that year because there are several talks on the subject and numerous poster presentations applying it). It can also help in learning about what is happening in other related fields. As a final year student, it gave me a chance to present my own work, build my professional reputation and thus, my career in applied psychology.

However, an increasingly important theme in health psychology is of sustainability, reflecting a growing concern in wider society. We had discussions on how health psychology could help achieve the UNs Sustainable Development Goals:

UN Sustainable Development Goals



(UN, 2018)

For example, we could help reduce inequalities, education, gender equality and sustainable cities and communities. Responsible consumption and production is another key topic area which may be impacted by our work, reducing meat intake and fuel use in transport.

However, a conference as things currently stand represents neither of these things. People sometimes travel by air to attend, particularly for international conferences. I travelled overland and by train myself and I enjoyed having the opportunity to see my surroundings, have time to write and listen to music. Yet, not all who attend can make that time (or live within a reasonable distance to make that choice) or have those inclinations as it can be tiring or they may experience issues such as travel sickness. So perhaps there is an alternative: virtual conference attendance and increased use of webinars. There is certainly more room for this method of transmitting knowledge to interested attendees to grow, the technology is relatively inexpensive and widely available in the era of the internet of things and this may help increase reach (and thus impact). On the other hand, I have attended enough events at conferences to know a number of these occur as a result of spontaneous discussions which lead to collaboration. Maintaining contact within a network after meeting and exchanging

details does take some effort but can lead to some wonderful work being done together and ideas for new directions. It's hard to imagine a virtual conference having quite the same impact and a chatroom facility might not have the same appeal. In addition, face to face contact can be important to build trust and influence, which can be the key to maintaining a livelihood in professions such as psychology.

The other issue is a lot easier to resolve, in a purely practical terms. This concerns what food is offered at conferences. In Westernised contexts at least, it is still the norm to assume people prefer to eat meat at meals and dietary requirement forms tend to be used to inform organisers the person is vegan or vegetarian. However, it does not necessarily have to be this way. If vegetarian or vegan options are default at break and mealtimes people may be more likely to consume them spontaneously, as it can play into impulse and availability. Indeed Temporal Motivation Theory (Steel & König, 2006) is built on the premise that time can be an important factor in motivation. Particularly for those with greater impulsivity, close proximity to small goals set to achieve a larger objective can be effective. In this context, most people I have spoken to at health psychology conferences are aware of the importance of sustainability and limiting meat and dairy intake to reduce their carbon footprint as this is the most effective way to achieve this. Thus, they would be willing to take vegetarian, and potentially vegan, options if presented to them as a default (in potential support of this idea, one of these conferences ran out of vegetarian options for someone who identified as such as these were over-subscribed). There is a battle to change hearts and minds in the wider social and cultural landscape to embrace sustainability, but we could make a useful start by changing our own culture at these events to lead by example.

References:

Steel, P. & König, C. J. (2006), Integrating Theories of Motivation, *Academy of Management Review*, 31(4), 889-913.