

Survival of the fittest

Nadezhda Whittaker, University of Westminster:

Criticism often becomes an issue for students who are just beginning their degree in psychology. Many come with preconceptions derived from reading Freud or popular psychology books. For some, the first year brings disillusionment as the scientific method turns out not to be as romantic as they hoped, instead requiring rigorous tests and lengthy referencing.

Three years ago, when I started my psychology degree, I firmly believed that it would provide me with answers to the mysteries of the mind. Very much like Dean, I was rather shocked by the fact that there weren't any readily available formulas, and words such as *could* and *might* prevailed. Luckily, just as I was losing my faith in finding easy ways of 'making the world a better place', I found a new passion in a beauty of logic of proper science. For that I am grateful to Tony Stone, my lecturer in the philosophy of science at South Bank University, where I started my degree. Among many interesting things he introduced us to were the writings of Karl Popper.

It was Popper (1980) who put forward falsification as a criterion of demarcation between science and metaphysical speculations. According to him, for a theory to be falsifiable 'it must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience' (p.41). He also argued that empirical method is characterised by 'its manner of exposing to falsification, in every conceivable way, the system to be tested. Its aim is not to save the lives of untenable systems but, on the contrary, to select the one which is by comparison the fittest, by exposing them all to the fiercest struggle for survival' (p.42).

This demarcation criterion is

In last September's 'Students' Dean Wilson wrote that academic criticism too often spills over into personal and petty point-scoring. Readers were asked how they felt about criticism. Here we publish two of the responses.

particularly important for psychology, where unsupported speculations are far easier to make than in any of the 'hard' sciences like physics. Also, the subject of inquiry, the human mind, has an 'uncomfortable' ability of self-reflection, because of which everyone appears to know something about psychology. In such an atmosphere professional psychologists must be particularly careful to adhere to scientific rigour – the heart of which, according to Popper, is putting all theories to the harshest test and criticism possible, so that only 'the fittest' survive.

Reference

Popper, K.R. (1980). *The logic of scientific discovery*. London: Hutchinson.

Ming Wai Wan, postgraduate student at the University of Manchester: In general I find that psychology's open arena to discuss and constructively criticise is a highly positive and indeed vital aspect of the discipline, and one that ensures that the field remains dynamic and productive. Constructive criticism stimulates new ideas, encourages interaction and questions and basically makes the academic world go round.

Of course, as with everything, there are

exceptions, and, as Dean Wilson pointed out, sometimes the criticism seems solely about 'point-scoring'. Psychologists are still first and foremost human (with certain agendas), and no matter how much we try to discourage this type of contribution, it will never go away completely. This is probably not helped by (but is not simply caused by) 'publish-or-perish' academic requirements. Still, I find that most papers are not negative about other people's work or at least not without a valid point (which may open up new avenues for research or inspire the original investigator to reply and defend his or her ideas).

The fundamental difference between valid, constructive criticism and personal, destructive comebacks is in the accompanying 'evidence' that supports it. The vast majority of claims made in the academic literature are supported by some sort of evidence. However, the problem is that there is true evidence and pseudo-evidence, and even more problematic is the fine line between the two. Students are often criticised for not using sufficient evidence to support their claims or for not expressing them clearly. Unfortunately, seasoned academics are often guilty of not using valid evidence themselves (but are better at disguising it). We all need to be encouraged to analyse and interpret all evidence in a critical and rigorous manner.

In reply to Dean Wilson's article, yes, it is crucial that we concentrate on why we do the things the way we do and not just on picking at what others have found. But I feel that the majority of psychologists are just seeking the truth (and passionately so) and as long as we keep analysing scientifically and critically (but not in a personal, attacking way), we are hopefully coming closer to our goal as our subject grows older.

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