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## The crisis of psychology in resources safety

Dr Dean Laplonge\*, 22 August 2012



RELYING on psychology to help improve the safety of people working in high risk environments is now commonplace. But does anybody really know why? When leaders of resource companies agree to pay millions of dollars for a program which claims that psychologists can change safety behaviours, do they really know what they are doing?

Psychology is a recent discipline of thought. While there is evidence of ideas similar to those we would today describe as "psychology" within ancient cultures, contemporary psychology emerged only in the late nineteenth century. Freud and Jung are perhaps the most well-known psychologists who gave wider fame to psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century. And from the middle of the last century on, we see the popularity of a focus on human behaviour as the preferred way for psychology to go, particularly in Anglo cultures.

The history of psychology goes unnoticed in the application of psychological theories to workplace safety today. Psychology is just one of the many disciplines of thought which emerged in the post-Enlightenment era to provide us with a means of understanding and interpreting what we as humans do. Yet psychology is now believed by many to offer the "truth" of how we relate to safety at work.

Resource companies have jumped on the bandwagon of seeking to improve workplace safety by tapping into the solutions to "bad" human behaviour that psychology claims to offer. They employ people with an undergraduate degree in psychology to roll-out behavioural observation programs which promise visibility of how safely employees really go about their work. They promote models and slogans which psychologists claim can get employees to focus on the real link between their attitudes and behaviours. "Safety culture" is the new buzz word, with every resource company seeking to establish a safety culture better than what their competitors has. Every resource company wants a "psych" who they can promote as the guru of human behaviour. And consultancies which employ psychologists are cashing in.

It's fair to say that this phenomenon is not so far removed from what has happened in the wider culture over the past few decades. The popularity of psychology is reflected in the high levels of interest people have in celebrities like Oprah Winfrey whose simplistic responses to complex human issues make us believe we can all be "saved".

What is particularly appealing for resource leaders is how psychology claims to be able to change the attitudes and behaviours of everyone and anyone. Differences in context, experiences or mood do not need to be considered. A single safety culture and a single way of thinking about safety are always the promised goals. They believe that the more they speak the psychological mantras and the more they talk about "our safety culture", the more likely it is that people will actually start to believe and follow. For the leaders of resource companies, who over the past century have steadily become the arm of the state in disciplining the worker, it has to be more appealing to believe they can discipline a workforce that thinks and acts the same.

The real and sustainable impacts of psychology on safety are, however, questionable. To date, there has been no independent research into the effectiveness of psychological practices on improving workplace safety. All the available research comes from the very same consultancies which sell the programs or from psychologists who are indoctrinated by their own methods.

The impacts on how people have come to view their workplace cultures are, however, astounding. Where Freud once spoke about a gap between the conscious and the unconscious, we now see in the application of psychology to safety a gap between the real and the imagined in the workplace cultures of resource companies. The models of safety culture and the language that are being used to promote safer workplace practices are the imagined. But the realities of what people actually say and actually do rarely match.

Employees readily repeat the mantras of the programs. They talk about their safety culture in ways that are eerily reminiscent of the predictions of George Orwell in 1984. Rarely are employees able to articulate what they mean by what they say. Meaning and interpretation become irrelevant, so long as the slogans are known.

The promise of the success of psychology also does not allow for the possibility that workers can consciously act one way when under observation and another way when not. It does not allow for differences in the way people interpret the same words and phrases. It doesn't appreciate that "culture"—even a safety one—has never been and can never be singular.

In this rush to benefit from the promises of psychology, we have not stopped to think about why psychology has managed to get such a stronghold over safety in the resources industry. Psychologists trust in their programs without question. Safety personnel apply their knowledge of psychology in an uncritical manner. Psychology has become a powerful discourse in contemporary culture.

And in the resource industry, this has now translated into an enormous amount of power and authority—which translates into dollars—for those who can claim to have "knowledge" of psychology.

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