

Professorial Lecture: Driven Beyond Discipline Boundaries by a Commitment to Social Change



Presented by

Professor Rosemary Leonard

Chair in Social Capital and Sustainability

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2:00pm -3:30pm (followed by afternoon tea)

Western Sydney University - Liverpool Campus (Level 9)

ABSTRACT:

At the start of my academic career I had many reasons both personal and professional to be loyal to my original discipline of psychology. However, my first research position in the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research had already convinced me that my political values and commitment to research could work together. Thus I saw the psychological theories and methods as just one set of tools among many that could be applied to social issues. I was delighted to come and work at this University where others are committed to using research to empower people in Western Sydney.

After hearing about social capital for the first time from Eva Cox' Boyer Lecture in 1995, I immediately saw the concept's potential for examining the power of social groups and community development. I aligned myself with Third Sector Research (on not-for-profit organisations) where I interacted with researchers from economics, political science, management, sociology and development studies, but I could see that my psychological knowledge added value from both the pool of knowledge on groups and their rigorous quantitative methods.

Working for the CSIRO on interdisciplinary environmental sustainability projects brought new insights and challenges. They had figured out that many of the obstacles to implementing their elegant scientific findings were human induced. However climate scientists, hydrologists, modellers, etc. often cannot comprehend a world of knowledge beyond traditional scientific methods so integration was slow but we had made progress. It was there I discovered social network analysis – a method in search of a theory – which has the potential to bridge disciplines.

Returning to this University I have continued my interdisciplinary route through positioning myself in the Sociology and Anthropology group and the University-wide Environmental Sustainability Research Theme. Now the pendulum has swung again: we have leaders to promote disciplines and a separation of psychology from the social sciences. Still I maintain my belief that research which aims to address real-world problems needs to consider the full range of knowledges and skills that might be brought to bear and they are unlikely to be within one discipline.

In this lecture, I will argue that we need to recognise that the subjects of our research in all the disciplines of the social sciences and psychology are the same species and almost all our research insights are correct at some level. So how can we identify the theories, concepts, and methods that will help us to bridge discipline boundaries, provide a richer deeper understanding of what it means to be human, and facilitate the forms of human activity that constitute a progressive social agenda?

BIOGRAPHY:

Professor Rosemary Leonard is Chair in Social Capital and Sustainability in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology. Her research career started in the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and then the Cumberland Disability Education Program. From a PhD at Macquarie University in developmental social psychology, she came to UWS in 1991 to lecture in human communication and researched issues facing older women. She was instrumental in forming the School of Social, Community, and Organisational studies which later became the School of Social Sciences. In 2000-2004, she was Chair of Australian and New Zealand Third Sector Research and then Editor of their journal Third Sector Review. After 4 years as leader of the Social Justice Social Change Research Centre, she went to CSIRO to work on the social dimensions of tackling environmental sustainability returning as CSIRO-Western Sydney Joint Chair in Social Capital and Sustainability in 2016.

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