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Policy Brief

Challenges & Promise in Antarctic Psychology

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Summary

Antarctic psychology research has a fundamental shortage of tools and standard fundamentals which must be addressed in order to fulfill its promise and reap benefits that for decades have been discussed but have yet to be fully realized: (1) creation of mental health intervention regiments and training protocols for expeditioners and support staff, (2) leveraging in a practical manner positive experiences resulting from Antarctic deployments, and (3) facilitating the use of Antarctica as a space analogue for psychological study.

These benefits could increase the well-being of expeditioners, amplify the utility of Antarctic psychology learnings in other fields, and increase vectors for positive attention in the public eye.

Achieving these benefits requires international coordination in the research community to create a roadmap of challenges, open questions, and unaddressed fundamentals in the field, and use that roadmap to drive research study designs through different NAPs across the continent and across multiple seasons.

Recommendations

- 1) Publish an open call to the international community of polar psychology researchers (Arctic and Antarctic) to start addressing basic science fundamentals of polar psychology, not just applied psychology.
- 2) Pool together a list of core constraints researchers consistently encounter and break this list down into fundamental open questions.
- 3) Run a workshop, or several, to create a coordinated roadmap and plan to tackle these fundamentals and create pressure in the NAP/research community to adhere to the roadmap.
- 4) The roadmap should address the need for (i) a standard framework around the variables and controls used in studies, and (ii) a way to generate compatible data across multiple studies that can be analyzed as a whole, with a common set of tools.

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Detail

Antarctic psychology research is constrained by small, mostly homogenous datasets (i.e. the transient Antarctic population) and an abundance of variables that are difficult to build controlled, randomized studies around. This has created a situation where, despite decades of research and useful outcomes, the field is advancing slower than expected due to the difficulty in drawing generalized conclusions across multiple studies.

Contributing to this is the use of different tools and methods with which studies have been conducted. Without standardization, researchers have found their own way to mitigate against a lack of laboratory rigor. Furthermore, conditions around Antarctic deployments have changed over the past few decades, making them often less psychologically stressful, and thus creating inconsistencies in study results over the years that have so far been impossible to normalize.

Policy implications & Conclusions

The recommendations encourage a common effort across NAPs and the polar psychology community at large so that limited resources – access to the Antarctic population – can be utilized smartly and less studies repeat the conclusion “we cannot generalize these results; more research is needed.”

Achieving this requires finding (or creating) an organization or working group that can serve as a central point of information and provide guidance to the polar community (Antarctic *and* Arctic). An Antarctic program that takes on this challenge would likely need to find a counterpart in the polar psychology community at large, as well as build connections to other NAPs.