

## Contact Email for August 2016

As a follow up to the great discussion started by my last email, I thought it worth pushing the envelope a bit more. I did put a reference to Michael Higgins, the President of Ireland, who, among other things, is a Sociologist, who became President with far more votes than any Irish politician in the history of the republic. One of the points he made was:

*Universities needed to be allowed to flourish as spaces with the intellectual courage to reject dominant ideologies and encourage the seeking of truth from fact. We must first recognise that we live at a time when the language and rhetoric of the speculative market has become embedded in the educational culture and has brought some university practices down a precarious road. That reductive view has brought us, I believe, to a time of great questioning about the purpose of the university – much of which has been corrosive – and perhaps even to a moment of intellectual crisis.....Any abandoning or relegation of the humanities in our academic institutions would be seen by future generations as a “betrayal of the purpose of education”, “If we wish to develop independent thinkers and questioning, engaged citizens, our universities must, while providing excellence in professional training, avoid an emphasis that is solely or exclusivity on that which is measurable and is demanded by short-term outcomes.*

I entirely agree, but I don't think politicians would like his last point.

New Scientist (6/8/16 p42) reviews' two new publications (one by two public health experts and one by a sociologist), looking at the question of why people refuse to accept scientific facts. This again is part of the dominant theory problem. Dominant theories need not be those of academia, they can be accepted uncritically by people with no background in the subject. One book points out that one in five people in the US will die from heart disease. Yet the chance of contracting Ebola from Thomas Duncan, the only person to die of Ebola in the US, is one in 13.3 million. Yet it was the second issue that caused mass public hysteria.

The problem with dominant theories is that people are prepared to believe them, whatever the evidence against them is produced. Succinctly put in the title of the public health book "Denying to the Grave". Exploring the psychology, neurobiology and evolutionary roots that are behind our decision making, conclude that they work by first activating the brains emotional centre, the amygdala, using inflammatory and emotional words and images, (see Donald Trump) which also trigger strong hippocampal memory. This will inhibit the prefrontal cortex, which deals with reason and emotional control of the brain. The first one to get an idea in someone's head in this way, is the idea that sticks. The problem for science, sociology and any other data based knowledge is that data by itself does not resonate with most people, and if the anti-data mob get there first your chance of your data being accepted is considerably diminished.

Dogma or the dominant theory, wherever it is found; be it in physics, anthropology, religion, sociology, politics or anywhere else, has in the past and no doubt will in the future, cause death, hostility, loss of employment and misery.

The saving grace is that when someone asks you to do research for them, it means they have not got a dominant theory about the situation, so whether you give them a positive solution or a negative one you have a good chance of your results being accepted.

*Alan Scott*, Continuing Education Officer.