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Psychology Teachers Shaping Psychology

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Teaching is about learning. The most effective teachers assist students in becoming more able learners and are willing to guide students in taking advantage of learning opportunities. Teachers of psychology shape the field of psychology through their students. More often than not, a teacher of psychology has only a single opportunity to influence students' knowledge of psychology. Unfortunately, most of what is known about psychology in our society appears to have been gleaned from the media and pop literature. Teachers of psychology at least have a chance to help their students in distinguishing between pop psychology and scientifically based psychology, thus greatly improving what is understood about psychology in the public domain.

What is the psychology that teachers should teach if it is to be best understood? Is psychology well presented in the typical introductory text, where students learn that it is represented by a dozen or so chapters with different titles? No. The traditional introductory textbook fragments psychology. All too often the psychology curriculum is comprised of a collection of courses that are no more than elaborated versions of chapters in the introductory text. Are we offering an integrated discipline? Again, no. Irwin Altman (as cited in Murray, 1999) asserted that psychologists will continue teaching psychology in fragmented ways even at the risk of its withering away. Others (e.g., Bevan, 1982, 1991; Kimble, 1984; Spence, 1987) have expressed concern that psychology's increasing diverseness portends its total fragmentation.

The psychology of the last half century is vastly different from the psychology of the first half of the century. With minor exceptions during psychology's early years, the relatively small number of psychologists in the United States were engaged in teaching and research in the academy. Social changes in the aftermath of World War II led to dramatic variations in psychology and in opportunities for psychologists. Contrary to their predecessors, post-WW II psychologists were more interested in and had more opportunities in applied work, and their numbers grew. More psychologists joined college and university faculties as there were more programs and students, and more

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graduates moved into applied positions. Organized psychology deemed it prudent to set up educational and training criteria.

From one committee studying these issues came the scientist-practitioner model, an effort designed to assure that those in applied graduate study were well grounded in scientific psychology. This model remains prevalent in traditional graduate programs in psychology, although less so in specialty graduate programs. Whether the model had the intended impact on graduate programs and their products is open to conjecture. Nevertheless, big changes began to occur in psychology and the organizations that represent psychology. The education and training of psychologists now varies significantly within and between graduate units with many psychologists sharing little similarity in education, training, interests, and work with other psychologists.

Today's psychology is a diverse field whose members share the name but often have little else in common. To the extent that psychology is fragmented, some credit can be assigned to the vast differences found among its participants. Diverseness within an individual, as reflected in breadth and depth of interests, knowledge, and abilities strengthens the discipline and is typically not construed to reflect fragmentation. Sternberg and Grigorenko (1999) referred to individualized diverseness as “dilettantism,” and noted that this attribute has characterized outstanding psychological scientists, and I would add, outstanding teachers. A discipline whose members possess such an attribute and whose members share mutual interests would be one of promise and productivity. On the other hand, it seems to me that a field whose diversity is found in varied and narrower interests, knowledge, and abilities among its members would be more a collective than a discipline.

I believe, as do others (e.g., Kimble, 1984, 1994; Staats, 1998), that psychology needs to expend considerable of its substantial resources in developing an integrative, multilevel theory that provides the fundamentals—the foundation—for psychology, the discipline. A proposal by Kimble (1999) represents a step in that direction, setting forth a multilevel conceptual scheme outlining how those who work under the rubric of a scientific psychology, whether investigative or applied, can apply their efforts in a systematic context.

In the meantime, what is the psychology student to be taught? I submit that it must be an integrated approach to the discipline and one whose base is in scientific psychology. In that most traditional introductory textbooks present psychology in a fragmented manner, wise and able teachers must meet the challenge of portraying psychology as an integrative whole. Senior faculty may be best prepared to assist in learning an integrated psychology. However, junior faculty with the appropriate knowledge base and scientific perspective can do the job under adequate mentoring.

I believe it important both to psychology and society that psychologists be grounded in systematic principles—the fundamentals of science. Psychology is a field that has implications for understanding the cognitive, emotional, biological, and behavioral

aspects of all people. However, if it is to be a discipline rather than a fragmented field, teachers of psychology must shape it in that direction. Teachers of psychology can enhance the process by helping students to know what science is and what it is not, how scientific evidence is gleaned, and how science contributes to knowledge. Further, teachers of psychology can assist students in understanding that not all phenomena important to people are amenable to scientific inquiry and why this is the case. Students can be taught to learn the differences between beliefs and scientific evidence and how their values, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and perspectives are influenced by each. Students can be aided in becoming aware of important contributions by psychologists and why they are important to understanding human nature. This task can be accomplished using the content, conceptions, and processes fundamental to the science of psychology. Psychology is not, if it is to be a viable discipline, represented by dozen or so chapters in an introductory text. Yet that is often how our students are taught to know our field. I have long advocated that psychology be taught from a developmental perspective. Such approach would demonstrate a continuity of development and serve to integrate what students may all too often perceive as disjointed parts.

If we hope to have a systematic discipline, we cannot leave it to our students to integrate the field on their own. Students need our assistance; we must serve as models of integrative thinking. Teachers who achieve and practice dilettanism—those who have and use breadth and depth of knowledge (Sternberg & Grigornenko, 1999), will be able to assist their students in gaining a meaningful perspective on psychology.

Being an effective teacher of psychology requires a perspective of the discipline as a systematic enterprise, an extensive knowledge of the content and processes of psychology, and a passion for sharing these with students in the belief that the qualities of their lives will be enhanced as a result. Thus, we will shape psychology in important directions and increase it's likelihood of continuation as a viable discipline.

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