

Teachers of Psychology, Keepers of Psychology

Bernard C. Beins

Ithaca College

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In the past century and a quarter, psychology as a discipline has evolved in ways that would probably surprise Wilhelm Wundt and shock E. B. Titchener. Moreover, the ways psychologists teach would undoubtedly astonish Harry Kirke Wolfe. In this essay, I describe how changes in psychology over the past century have led to fragmentation of our discipline and that teachers of psychology have been responsible for maintaining unity in psychology, to the extent that it exists. Further, I discuss how the rise of regional teaching conferences, starting with the Mid-America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP), has had enormous impact in maintaining psychology’s coherence: The proliferation of teaching conferences and other venues for teachers has had the ameliorating effect of bringing together psychologists with diverse backgrounds. Such gatherings have kept teachers with different specialties and backgrounds talking to one another.

Unity in Psychology: Then and Now

The only time psychology was a unified discipline was in 1879, when Wilhelm Wundt opened the first psychology laboratory. By the time the American Psychological Association (APA) held its first convention in 1892, however, there were already controversies and theoretical divisions.

The first real attempt to sequester experimental psychology from the broader discipline occurred when Titchener formed the Society of Experimental Psychologists (SEP) in 1904. In addition to SEP, other groups, including the Psychological Round Table (PRT) and the Gesellschaft für Unendlich Versuch (Society for Endless Research [GUV]), subsequently formed in the United States.

These groups still exist, although they seem to be more like fraternities than professional organizations. Although their members were not happy with APA’s stewardship of psychology, the formation of these groups did little to fragment psychology further. As one former member of PRT noted, the activity of PRT was silly, “but it was just so much damn fun” (Reber, personal communication, June 24, 2004).

More recently, organizations such as the Psychonomic Society, founded in 1959, and the American Psychological Society (APS), founded in 1988, emerged because their members were unhappy with the direction that psychology was taking. Although APS was initially successful in attracting members, its membership seems to have reached a plateau. It probably formed too late to prevent the tumble of psychologists toward specialty groups.

These varied groups may have reflected a fragmentation of psychology, but I do not believe they had much impact on the discipline. Why did these organizations, which included many prominent psychologists, have so little impact on the discipline?

First, these groups were intentionally kept small. For example, members were “superannuated” (i.e., expelled) when they reached the age of 40 (Benjamin, 1977). Second, they were elitist. Acceptance into these groups was by nomination of other members only. Third, some of these groups were sexist. SEP, for example, was exclusively male during Titchener’s lifetime, because he felt that women were too sensitive to criticism and that men would not be able to smoke their cigars in the presence of women. Similarly, PRT had no specific restrictions against women, but its members believed that there were no qualified, female, experimental psychologists (Benjamin, 1977). Fourth, these organizations tended to be shadowy. For instance, traces of PRT and GUV are scant, and PRT members were encouraged not to make their membership public. Finally, these groups were inward looking. From my perspective as a nonmember, these groups seemed to be well-satisfied with themselves and did not see the need to change as psychology attracted more women and more people with clinical or applied interests.

Although these groups aimed to shape psychology in their images, they are little more than interesting footnotes in the history of psychology. Their members have contributed greatly to the psychological literature, but as a discipline, psychology has marched along without regard to their desires.

The Real Threat to Psychology’s Unity

The real threat to psychology has been specialty groups. Initially, specialty groups such as the American Association of Clinical Psychologists and the Association of Consulting Psychologists posed little threat to psychology’s unity. Beginning in the 1930s, however, the threat became reality. The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) began attracting psychologists. Although SPSSI is now a division of APA (Division 9), it was initially independent of APA. Similarly, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP), like a number of societies, joined APA’s divisional structure in 1947 but has continued to assert its independence. Although it was not their goal, many of these societies engendered some fragmentation in psychology. For instance, even though SRCD’s membership includes many psychologists, those psychologists who do research on children seem more likely to identify professionally with SRCD than with APA. As we now know, many psychologists have forgone APA membership in favor of membership in their own specialty groups. Consequently, this fragmentation has resulted in a lack of communication across many subspecialties.

How Teachers of Psychology Enter the Picture

I see one haven for unity in psychology, and that is among teachers. The various teaching conferences and regional psychological associations still bring psychologists with a broad

range of interests and expertise together. This was not a foregone conclusion; rather it is a contingent fact of history that depended on the confluence of certain activities by specific people.

In the early 1980s, the division of APA on Teaching (Division 2, subsequently renamed the Society for the Teaching of Psychology [STP]) became a significant institution in psychology. For the first 25 or so years of its existence, STP was not particularly vigorous in advancing teaching issues; in fact, it is not clear that STP was particularly vigorous in much of anything. For instance, Floyd Ruch, who served twice as STP's president (in 1947 and 1962) remarked that he had forgotten that he had been president in 1947 (Wight & Davis, 1992). Moreover, when I first became active in STP in 1986, Bill McKeachie was the only pre-1980 president who was still active. If we examine two 15-year periods—1971 to 1985 and 1989 to 2003—we can see a striking difference in level of activity by past presidents: In 1986, 4 past presidents from the previous 15 years were still active in STP; in the subsequent 15 years, 10 to 12 presidents still have a presence. STP presidents no longer just come and go.

Whereas the early years of STP were not marked by vigorous advancement of teaching issues, the 1980s were right for the development teaching initiatives, and one person in particular served as a major catalyst for significant movement. In 1984, Joe Palladino established the Mid America Conference for Teachers of Psychology (MACTOP), which provided teachers, mostly from undergraduate institutions, the opportunity to meet and discuss issues related to the teaching of psychology. MACTOP existed from 1984 to 2002 and featured over 300 presentations, which is an average of 16 hour-long presentations per meeting. Sixteen hours is more time than APA devoted to teaching at the entire 1986 APA convention.

I think MACTOP was important for two reasons. First, the stand-alone teaching conferences that sprang up in its wake have kept psychologists together. Where would have teachers of psychology gathered to discuss teaching if MACTOP and other, similar conferences didn't exist? They probably wouldn't have gone anywhere. MACTOP attendees generally came from relatively small, undergraduate institutions and rarely ventured far beyond their college gates. These teaching conferences, which featured a broad range of topics, permitted teachers to see quite clearly the connections among the multitude of specialties in psychology.

A second, major consequence of MACTOP was that it served as a meeting place for psychology teachers who ultimately helped bring STP to life. If you look at the list of MACTOP presenters, you will see that 13 of the last 18 STP presidents gave talks at the conference; other notable STP figures graced the MACTOP program over the years as well. It wasn't the case that Joe Palladino specifically selected prominent STP figures to speak at MACTOP (at the time, there were only a few of them); rather, the names reflect people with a true zest for teaching who were ready to assume the mantle of leadership and solidify the teaching of psychology as a scholarly domain.

Unfortunately, some regional teaching conferences have fallen on hard times. MACTOP, as well as the Eastern and the Southwestern conferences, have disappeared, although the

latter two conferences are attempting comebacks (see Bailey, 2005); and the Northeastern conference has joined with the annual convention of the New England Psychological Association. One reason for these hardships may be that many psychologists prefer to spend their limited travel funds on specialty conferences or, perhaps, on regional meetings (e.g., Eastern Psychological Association, Midwestern Psychological Association), which, fortunately, have become important venues for teaching-related issues. As such, regional conferences may be replacing the vanishing teaching conferences as a forum for teachers of psychology. Consequently, although psychology continues to fragment, psychologists interested in teaching flock to teaching conferences or attend regional conferences where the various facets of psychology rest comfortably under the single rubric of “psychology.”

Moreover, we are starting to see teaching-related programs popping up at other venues. For instance, under the auspices of STP, Neil Lutsky initiated teaching pre-conferences at the annual meetings of SPSP, and APS has partnered with STP for over a decade to offer the APS-STP Teaching Institute at its annual conference. In the future, I think we will see more teaching-related programming at similar conferences. It will be interesting, however, to see whether teachers, as a community, begin to fragment and sequester themselves within specialty groups. This could have a notable, long-term impact on the structure of psychology as a discipline.

The Long-Term Impact of STP and the Community of Teachers

Earlier, I identified five reasons why early specialty groups had little long-term impact on the discipline of psychology: (a) they were small, (b) they were elitist, (c) they were sexist, (d) they were shadowy, and (e) they were inward-looking. Do these also describe STP? Personally, I don't think so.

First, we are no longer small. Our membership is at about 3000 and still growing. This represents, on average, more than one person per psychology department in every institution in the country. We have enough size to have an impact on the field. Second, we aren't elitist. STP has made strides to incorporate teachers of psychology from all types of institutions and at all levels of education. Third, we aren't sexist. The list of presidents of STP shows an equality of opportunity, regardless of sex. Fourth, we aren't shadowy. As Ludy Benjamin once said, “Unless it is on paper, it doesn't exist.” Much to the contrary, STP has a clear and growing record of permanent resources that can function as the seed for further growth. For example, you can easily find out from various sources who belongs to STP. In addition, our resources on the Web continue to expand. Finally, we are not inward looking. The scope of our interests and the nature of our audience continue to expand. One of Bill Addison's goals during his presidential year has been to reach out even more, particularly to include more activity by psychology teachers at community colleges and in high schools.

Conclusion

I believe that teachers of psychology serve a very important function for our discipline. Although, there seems to be a tendency for professionals with psychological training to

forget their roots in psychology, teachers of psychology can serve a unifying function. I am optimistic that psychology will continue as a coherent discipline as long as teachers of psychology—especially those at the undergraduate level—recognize the importance of the scholarship of teaching and realize that a common interest in teaching can unite psychologists with diverse backgrounds. As long as undergraduate, liberal arts institutions sustain their initiatives toward broad, integrative education, and as long as psychology teachers congregate under a unified umbrella, I believe that teachers of psychology will shape our discipline and serve as the keepers of psychology. This essay was adapted from Barney's 2004 STP Presidential Address at the APA convention in Honolulu, Hawaii.

References

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