

Why It's Important to Export Our Field—and How We Can Do It Effectively

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In 1974, a series of events happened that changed the course of my career—and life. At the time, I was a newly minted associate professor enjoying the pleasures of tenure. Overall, I felt very good about my career and saw it developing along strictly traditional lines. Then, without warning, a major storm broke around my head: I received a “Golden Fleece” award from Senator William Proxmire. These awards were given by the Senator to the biggest wasters of taxpayers money, and I received one for my research on the effects of heat on aggression (the so-called “long, hot summer” effect)—research that was supported by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant. In fact, in making his “award,” the Senator ignored most of our careful, systematic laboratory research on this topic and focused, instead, on a single field study we had conducted—one in which we observed traffic to find out whether motorists honked their horns more often on hot, steamy days. (They did.) The Senator claimed that we had spent all of the funds in our grant on this project, when, in fact, it was a study we actually conducted without cost. But he didn’t seem to know—or care! The Dean of my college phoned and urged me to ignore the award, but I simply could not do that. So, I talked to reporters and explained to them the purpose of our research and how we actually spent our funds. Blessings on the press! Many reporters accepted my comments and joined in strong condemnation of Senator Proxmire. In fact, even the highly respected *Washington Post* published an editorial severely criticizing Proxmire’s tactics. Needless to say, people at NSF were pleased—in fact, they invited me to become a Program Director there.

When I arrived in Washington, DC, about 2 years later, all was fine. But then, Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter for the Presidency, and within a few months, my program (social and developmental psychology) experienced a 75% cut in budget. Many of my colleagues believed this drastic cut occurred because members of the Reagan administration were “anti-science.” After meeting several representatives who came to NSF to peruse our files, though, I had a very different impression. In my view, they cut the budget for my division and program not because they were anti-science, but because they truly did not understand the nature of psychology. They did not know it was largely scientific in orientation and adopted research methods similar to those used in other fields. At that point, I realized this distressing outcome was, to some extent, our fault! Perhaps we had not, as a field, been doing a very good job of communicating the true nature and immense value of psychology to our students and, therefore, to society as a whole.

Those thoughts, which recurred over and over during my time at NSF, strongly shaped my thinking about what we, as teachers of psychology, should be doing in our courses. Specifically, I asked myself this question: “Can’t I focus a bit more on explaining the value of psychology to students—and therefore, winning friends for our field?” This idea was stimulated, in part, by the fact that most students in my courses were not psychology majors. These students took

psychology courses not because they were required to do so, but because they were interested in them. In fact, for some, especially the engineering students, our courses were among the few electives they could take outside their major field. I found myself wondering, didn't we owe them more than simply an interesting course reflecting our own interests and expertise? Shouldn't we also be communicating as clearly as possible the value of psychology?

These thoughts produced major shifts in my own teaching and research; ultimately, they led me into a career path in which I have been, to some extent, an "exporter" of our field. I have frequently attempted to communicate not only psychology's content but also its essential value to people who are not going to become psychologists. As a result, I have taught students in every conceivable field, from undergraduate engineering and nursing students, to MBA, finance, and philosophy graduate students. In teaching these students, I have tried my best to be a true "exporter" of psychology—to illustrate the intrinsic value of our field and the many ways in which it can be put to excellent use by people who are not psychologists. Let me now explain why, in my view, this is an important goal.

Why We Should All Be "Exporters" of Psychology

In my view, there are two key reasons why we should want to export psychology. First, I believe it is the right thing to do. Psychology is scientific in orientation and approach, but it has always been an applied field as well. In other words, psychologists have always sought knowledge of human behavior to contribute in positive ways to human welfare. To the extent that is true, we have an obligation to communicate the value of psychology to our students and help them understand the many ways they can benefit from it.

There is a second compelling reason for exporting psychology: to gain the friends and supporters we need to guarantee the continued progress and advancement of psychology. If my 2 years at NSF taught me anything, it is this: We cannot take such support for granted! Each year, millions of young people take courses in psychology. Do they leave these experiences as "believers" in our field? Many do—of that I am sure. But many others, my own teaching experience tells me, are not convinced. These "doubters," or "skeptics," do not really believe we can use scientific methods to understand such topics as love, memory, the cognitive abilities of children, the effects of stress on health, the nature of psychological disturbances, and so on. Rather, they doubt the long-term value of our research. It is imperative that we reach these skeptics and convince them. If we do not, they will be the people who, in the future, vote against government support for psychological research, resist having psychology included in the curricula of their local schools, and seek to limit the rights of psychologists within the health care system. Can we afford to have such adversaries? Again, my experience at NSF tells me we cannot and we should adjust our teaching to reach out actively to these people and convince them of the essential value of our field.

How Can We "Export" Psychology Effectively? Some Techniques That Work

Again, I can almost hear your comments: "OK . . . so it's important to export psychology. But how exactly can we do this? What teaching methods or techniques work?" Obviously, there are

no simple answers, but here are two techniques that have worked for me. I hope you, too, find them useful.

Bring in Guest Lecturers from Other Fields and from Outside the University

I often invite individuals from other fields to my classes to discuss the ways they use psychology in their work. This provides students with vivid examples of how psychology is an invaluable tool, one used by people in many walks of life. Over the years, I have had guest lecturers from such fields as medicine, accounting, business, law, engineering, and marketing. Most are not professors; rather, they are practitioners of various occupations and professions who take time from their busy schedules to address my students. What do they talk about? Topics of interest to them and about which they know a great deal. But in my invitation, I always try to make it clear that my primary goal is illustrating to my students how important knowledge of human behavior is. The results are often outstanding, to say the least. Here are a few concrete examples.

Recently, I had a stock broker visit class. No, he didn't talk about the economics of the stock market or about financial rules and regulations, nor did he offer advice on how to make quick profits. Rather, he discussed the role of emotions in investment decisions. His main point was that emotions often influence people to take actions that, from a business point of view, are not rational. As he explained, one reason why people make common investment errors, such as rushing to buy when markets are high or selling when markets are low, is that they let their emotions rule their decisions. As psychologists, we know that affective reactions exert a powerful influence on many aspects of cognition, and although I often discuss this topic in my classes, most students do not appreciate how strong or general such effects can be. As my guest speaker described these examples from his own experience, I could virtually "see" many students—including the hardcore skeptics—moving toward the following conclusion: "Gee, there really is something to this behavioral stuff after all."

Here is another example. I have been fortunate to team-teach a course with Nobel-prize winning physicist Ivar Giaever. The course focuses on innovation and creativity, and my role is to describe the psychological aspects of these topics. As a world-renowned scientist, Ivar talks about creativity in science and how it has re-shaped our world. As you might guess, when Professor Giaever is present, attendance approaches 100%, and the students convey their tremendous respect for him throughout the session. Working with Professor Giaever has been a pleasure for me in many ways, but perhaps the best part is when he says something like this to the class: "Listen carefully to Professor Baron, because what he tells you is very important. Physics is central—it provides the keys to understanding the universe. But knowing about people—that may be even more important to you in the years ahead." Truly, I am flattered, and even more important, I realize once again that my faith in psychology is not misguided: It truly is valuable, and this fact is apparent to intelligent people even as far removed from our field as Nobel-prize winning physicists.

Few of us will be fortunate enough to have experiences such as this one. (I feel truly blessed!) But as I have suggested, there are many ways of demonstrating the value of our field to students. Guest lecturers do not have to be Nobel-prize winners to be effective. Rather, having people from other fields recognize the value of psychology—and use it in their own lives—is the key.

Use Short Cases and Exercises

I am not a fan of the “case method” of teaching. In fact, it goes against my own training in scientific psychology. Occasionally, however, I like to clip an interesting article from the newspaper and reproduce it for use as a short “case” (really, “example” or “illustration” is a better term). Here’s one example. Recently, I presented to my class an article on Victor Gonzalez, the founder of a new chain of pharmacies in Mexico. Mr. Gonzalez is unusual for a businessperson—he is highly extraverted, has a great sense of humor, and is something of a “maverick.” (His own family, a prominent one in Mexico, objects strongly to some of his tactics.) The point of the article, which students discuss in groups, is that the success of his new business is due, in part, to his personality. After reading this case, even the “doubters” from engineering or science begin to grasp the important role that individual difference variables play in a wide range of settings.

Here’s another example. When discussing basic principles of motivation, I often use an article that compares two farms in Russia. One operated as a collective farm, in which the people who worked the land were employees; the other was privately owned by farmers who owned the land and equipment. Guess which farm showed higher productivity? The fact that the privately-owned farm showed 5 times the output of the collective one provides a vivid illustration of a basic motivational principle: the importance of establishing close links between effort and outcomes. After reading this case, even skeptics sit up and listen more carefully.

I could readily provide other examples, but I am sure the main point is already clear: Short cases that illustrate the application of psychology’s principles and findings in situations outside the laboratory or university can be very useful, and I recommend their use in your courses.

An Optimistic Conclusion—Of Course!

If we truly believe—as I think most of us do—that our field is not only fascinating but also tremendously valuable and useful, then our task is really a happy one. As teachers of psychology, we can help large numbers of people outside our field appreciate its value. By doing so, we contribute not only to their future happiness and success, but also to the future growth and development of psychology. Perhaps the famous missionary Mother Teresa put it best when she said: “We ourselves often feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if that drop was not in the ocean, the ocean itself would be less because of that missing drop.” I agree. Our individual contributions to the goal of “exporting” psychology may seem small, but together, they do make a difference. The benefits will be real for our students, for society, and for psychology itself.