

Failing boys, failing psychology

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Few boys do psychology; and those who do, don't do it very well. A-level psychology is now the fourth most popular A-level with nearly 55,000 young people having entered for the exam in 2010 – not bad for a subject that attracted only 275 candidates when the first exam was sat back in 1972. Recent years have seen a huge explosion of interest in A-level psychology, and it has now become a serious topic for investigation by the academic community, with articles on the future of A-level psychology (Smith, 2010) and its popularity (Walker, 2010), not to mention several articles in *The Psychologist* (September 2010 and October 2007). However, few have turned their attention to a potentially damaging pattern: the near total exclusion of boys and the severe underachievement of those boys who dare to adopt the role of the 'rogue male' (Sanders et al., 2009).

Figures published by the Joint Council for Qualifications, a body representing the main exam boards in the UK, state that 54,940 students sat psychology A-level exams in June 2010. Of these 14,802 were male while a staggering 40,138 were female. The pattern is similar to that of psychology in Higher Education, where in 2006/7 the ratio of males to females was 1:4 (Sanders et al., 2009). This suggests that psychology is very much a female discipline.

Even more disconcerting than the gender imbalance in participation is the notable imbalance in performance between male and female candidates in

A-level psychology. In 2010 5.2 per cent of females obtained the newly introduced A* grade (awarded to students achieving an overall A grade with a 90 per cent pass rate in the second year of studies) while the number of boys achieving this coveted accolade stood at just 2.8 per cent. In fact, between 2005 and 2010, males consistently underperformed in relation to females by a significant margin.

Such a pattern of male underperformance is now common within primary and secondary education. It has been described as a moral panic (Smith, 2003), with the issue being addressed at length over the past decade or so (e.g. Epstein et al., 1998). The phenomenon appears to be global rather than localised (e.g. Majzub & Rais, 2010), and despite considerable research (e.g. Francis, 1999) and a number of initiatives, the trend for male underachievement (or female overachievement) appears to continue unabated.

Recently it has been strongly suggested that continually informing boys that girls do better may actually activate and reinforce the stereotype in some boys (Hartley, 2010). Indeed male underachievement could be the result of automatic social behaviour where educational professionals are unconsciously teaching boys how to fail, rather than reinforcing strategies more geared towards achievement. The female domination of the teaching profession has also led some to suggest that boys may engage more appropriately with learning if

taught by a male teacher, at least in primary school (Skelton, 2007): while 38 per cent of secondary schools teachers are men, the proportion is significantly lower in primary schools. Evidence in support of such suggestions remains tenuous, and it is perhaps more likely that a number of factors converge to disadvantage boys within the educational system.

A female pursuit?

The past few years have seen an increase in interest in the merits and problems surrounding A-level psychology (e.g. Smith, 2010). To some extent, pre-tertiary education in psychology has felt marginalised by higher education, with universities continuing to insist that A-level psychology provides an inappropriate grounding for degree level studies in psychology (Jarrett, 2010).

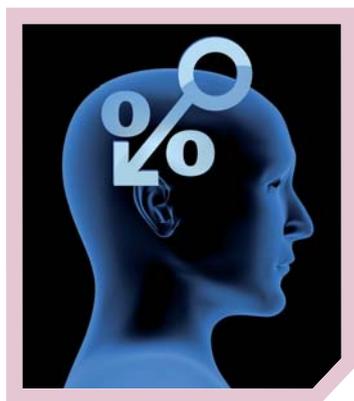
Other factors may work to further disadvantage those boys who do choose psychology at A-level. Rowley and Delgarno (2010) surveyed A-level psychology teachers in an attempt to better understand who they were and what they thought about their subject. According to their study, nearly 30 per cent of psychology teachers in schools do not hold a first degree in psychology and, perhaps more interestingly, nearly 80 per cent of those who responded to the survey were female, significantly higher than the 62 per cent of female teachers in secondary schools generally.

Such a significant gender imbalance creates the impression of psychology being a wholly female pursuit and an inappropriate choice for a boy, rather than the inclusive pursuit favoured by the psychology community. This can be seen further in the choice of topics at A2 level (the second year of the A-level). Taking the most popular examination specification as their yardstick, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance specification A (AQA A), Rowley and Delgarno discovered that the most popular topics chosen by teachers and heads of department at A2 were (in order

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of preference) relationships, biological rhythms, sleep and dreaming and pro- and anti-social behaviour. While other topics were chosen (e.g. cognitive development and perception) these remained in the minority while some (language and thought) failed to make an appearance. These results lend weight to previous accusations (e.g. Banister, 2003; Smith, 2010) that the biological and the cognitive aspects of psychology are being neglected, an argument proffered by universities in the case for rejecting A-level psychology as a pre-requisite for undergraduate study. It is worth noting that in the recent revision to the A-level syllabus some topics have been withdrawn while others have been altered; however, the top three remain almost intact, and it can be assumed that their popularity is likely to remain high. It could be argued that non-specialists shy away from topics with a more 'traditional science' feel, and plump for topics they feel will engage their mainly female student base.



Near total exclusion of boys

Boys do science

Although A-level psychology has been classified as a science since 2008, boys appear to be more attracted to traditional science-based subjects. In 2010, 44 per cent of biology candidates were male, significantly higher than the 27 per cent for psychology (boys outnumber girls in both physics and chemistry; however, girls still achieve higher grades but by a very small margin). In addition, while boys underperformed by an average of 13.5 per cent (between 2005 and 2009) against girls in psychology, in biology this difference stood at only 3.4 per cent over the same period, suggesting that not only are more boys choosing biology, they are

also more successful at it than boys who choose psychology. Interestingly boys also represent the majority in physical education and sports science, with very little difference between genders in terms of achievement. These subjects generally include a significant amount of psychology including studies of personality and motivation, areas that

form only a very minor part of most psychology specifications.

Despite the re-classification of A-level psychology it appears that students themselves doubt or are unaware of psychology's scientific credentials. Maras and Bradshaw (2007) found that only 62 per cent of teachers surveyed thought that

psychology is a science. However, Rowley and Delgarno found that, just three years later, 87 per cent of psychology teachers agreed with the proposition that psychology is a science. Despite this more favourable position the teachers in Rowley and Delgarno's sample rated chemistry, physics, biology and geology as more scientific than psychology. This, according to Rowley and Delgarno, raises some interesting questions about teachers' judgements concerning the nature of science and what makes a discipline scientific. This may be compounded when considering the large number of psychology teachers without a science background (or a psychology degree) and the significant number of psychology teachers who also teach sociology – of those without a psychology degree in Rowley and Delgarno's sample, around a quarter were sociologists.

Boys choose science and do well at it; those boys who choose psychology tend

to underachieve significantly. Boys are also more likely to choose fact-based subjects, such as economics, business studies and maths, and do well at these. Whilst the A-level psychology specifications allow for the study of topics including visual perception and cognition, many teachers appear to be choosing topics that best suit their own background, perhaps leading to a social psychological bias that may disadvantage the boys in their class due to the speculative nature of the topics. Subsequently schools are less likely to promote psychology as a science and more likely to classify it as a social science like sociology, where the gender imbalance is even more noticeable. Boys then find themselves the minority in a subject perceived as female; issues of participation, therefore, appear directly linked to issues of performance. Teachers may have changed their view concerning the scientific nature of psychology, but this hasn't manifested itself in a change in direction towards a more scientific A-level, a change that could work towards breaking the cycle.

It has been suggested that boys can be placed at an advantage through the implementation of an exam-only syllabus, and AQA intends to roll out a series of gender-specific GCSE science programmes as early as September 2011 (Stewart, 2010), claiming that boys do better at exams while girls are better at coursework. However, the removal of the coursework element from psychology in 2008 appears to have done little to rectify the gender imbalance. According to Elwood (1995), coursework plays only a minimal role in achievement differences between the genders and a larger role is played by teacher and pupil expectations as well as syllabus content.

Such a situation can only deter boys from choosing psychology and disadvantage those who choose to be part of the minority. With so little research conducted into the area, however, it may be some time before the picture becomes clearer. All that can be said for now is that while the popularity of A-level psychology is a cause for celebration, those issues that plague the subject continue to the detriment of those who study it – particularly boys.



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