



PERSONAL SPACE

JOHN RADFORD searches for unity in psychology.

All for one and one for all?

WHEN I first studied psychology nearly fifty years ago there were perhaps 200 graduates a year. Now there are 8000. Content, issues and employment have changed radically, but some issues persist. Among the first puzzles I faced were how psychology should be defined, and whether it was one thing or many. Fraser Watts (1992) asked in his Presidential Address: 'Is psychology falling apart?', and Ingrid Lunt (1999) in hers argued for 'unity through diversity'. Graham Davey (2002) in his BPS annual report 'Message from the President' claimed that the supply of psychology students will 'never' cease, partly because they view the subject as a unity. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001) argued for a 'unified psychology', eliciting five responses a year later. Indeed, defining psychology has been contentious throughout its history.

Sources of confusion

There seem to me to have been some persistent confusions. First, it is often unclear whether a definition of psychology is descriptive or prescriptive, a matter of fact or a desirable aim. Second, it often seems to be assumed that because there is one word – *psychology* – there must be one thing corresponding to it, if only we could find out what this is. In fact, *psychology* is a label that has been variously applied over time (Hearnshaw, 1964). And in particular, I have suggested – perhaps ad nauseam (e.g. Radford, 1996) – that such labels are often applied indiscriminately to three quite different kinds of thing:

- *Discipline*. A set of problems that seem to be related, with their associated methods of inquiry and bodies of knowledge. (Graham Richards, e.g. 1987, distinguishes psychology, the

discipline as an inquiry, from psychology, its subject matter.)

- *Profession*. A body of people, often (though not always) formally organised, who pursue and apply the discipline.
- *Subject*. A selection and organisation of material and resources for dissemination, particularly teaching.

The three terms do not map neatly on to each other. Psychology as a subject will be, or should be, very different for police officers and nursery nurses. Each will be a selection from the discipline, and neither will produce a professional psychologist. And only a profession can be an agent: a discipline or a subject cannot do anything or say anything.

I think these distinctions have practical implications. Policies that are correct for one sense of *psychology* may be quite wrong for another. Arguments are prolonged when psychologists are unwittingly talking about two different things. Consider territoriality. It is professionally important that only properly qualified persons should practise. This is first of all for the protection of the non-qualified – clients and general public. But it is also quite properly for the self-interest of the qualified, who may legitimately defend themselves against both charlatans and other professions. For without control over our own profession how can we prevent its abuse? Unity is important because it is strength. Hence the Society's long struggle for registration.

Territoriality is also an issue for the subject. It is not so much a matter of qualification, as of control of curricula and resources. This may seem blunt to those who have not run a department, but it can be crucial. But for the discipline, territoriality is irrelevant or harmful. It

would be absurd to exclude the work of Freud, James, Galton or Wundt, none of whom was a qualified psychologist. It is damaging to exclude genetics, statistics, anthropology, and a dozen more. The task rather is to integrate knowledge from diverse sources, often gained by diverse methods and on diverse assumptions.

Sources of unity

Unity in a discipline, I suggest, resides primarily in the problems on which it is focused, rather than in methods, content, theoretical approaches or personnel. For psychology, they are those of the individual human being. This is an inclusive, not an exclusive view: in no way does it deny that the individual functions in a social context, and is formed on a physiological substrate. The ideal of the discipline of psychology is to use all relevant knowledge to understand (for example) not just mathematical ability in general, but *why* this child is a prodigy, or is struggling.

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001) rather similarly argue for a unified psychology adopting 'an integrated multidisciplinary

approach', focusing on phenomena, not methods. Their view is prescriptive, not descriptive, and they suggest various moves towards unification. But they take as read what 'psychology' refers to; what are to count as psychological phenomena. The responses to their article argued variously that unification is unnecessary because it will happen anyway, or that it is impossible because of fundamental differences, such as whether psychology can or should seek universal moral principles.

My usage is descriptive rather than prescriptive: there is an identified set of problems (etc.), and the most appropriate label is 'psychology'. Further, the discipline is not just the problems, but the knowledge we have about them and the assumptions we make, plus a characteristic approach to investigation that has proved productive – objective, empirical, testable. Otherwise what psychics and priests do would be psychology. Unsupported assertions about human behaviour are not psychology as a discipline.

Professional unity is a matter of voluntary association, the adoption of criteria such as recognised training and continued development, concern for the client's interests, and self-regulation (see Radford, 2003), as well as the scientific ideals of the discipline. Within this framework, practice and subject matter may vary widely. The underlying problem with the graduate basis for registration (GBR), which Tony Gale for one has criticised (Gale, 2002), is that it seeks professional unity on a basis of subject conformity. In a subject, unity may not be achieved at all, especially in a modular system. I think this is educationally unfortunate. In the UK unity has traditionally rested on identifying the

'essence' of a discipline (hence the perennial question: What is psychology?). I have argued instead (Radford, 1992) for a pragmatic approach, in which unity is defined by aim, and demonstrated by showing how each part of a curriculum relates to that aim.

Students' choice of psychology

Few students thinking of taking psychology will be aware of any of this. Nevertheless it affects them, and they are the life-blood of psychology in all its three senses. Mostly, students choose a course, as they have done since universities began, to gain a useful qualification (Radford *et al.*, 1997). 'Useful' means leading to a career they

'Unity is important because it is strength'

think they will enjoy. In psychology this means broadly one dealing with people, with an emphasis on caring. This reflects an 80 or 85 per cent female balance. The main reason for the present popularity of psychology is the increase, up to and beyond parity, in the proportion of women entering higher education (Radford & Holdstock, 1998), of course within the overall rise in the student population. The corollary is that we are not attracting our share of men.

Probably less than a quarter of our degree students can hope to become professional psychologists, even broadly defined. Indeed, some 30 per cent currently enter jobs requiring no degree at all (Jobbins, 2003). Yet most students, I guess, want a GBR-worthy course. This seems to me potentially dangerous. Demand can fall as well as rise, especially if expectations are disappointed. Student numbers as a whole are still rising, which may mean more psychology graduates, but also more disappointed ones. There is some evidence that demand for graduates courses is falling in the US (see *research.apa.org*).

All subjects that are not wholly professional claim to offer all sorts of general skills and knowledge, but seldom offer any firm evidence. It is really rather strange that psychologists do not better establish their claims. I myself remain convinced of the general educational value of psychology, but this is more a matter of faith and argument than hard facts. It is certainly professionally useful in many

practical ways, but for the individual graduate the value is more speculative. Fletcher *et al.* (1991) found that employers tended to see psychology graduates as 'good with people' in a rather vague way, but not particularly good at much else. I have found no later study. We need a systematic examination of the employment prospects for students with an interest in psychology, and courses that prepare them appropriately – including two-year 'foundation' courses. We should also ask whether we have more to offer to the large male majority whom we fail to attract.

Conclusion

We must not let one sort of unity confuse us about another. Unity of the profession I strongly support. We should hang together, despite differences... or assuredly worse fate awaits. Unity of the discipline is a matter of wide-ranging inquiry but with an awareness of its focus. Unity of the subject is in my experience desirable, but it should derive from the purposes of individual courses, which need continual rethinking in rapidly changing times.

■ John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London. E-mail: j.k.radford@btinternet.com.

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