

'Adapt or perish – understand ourselves'

As psychology at the University of East London celebrates its 50th anniversary, Miles Thomas (UEL) talks to its first Head of Department, **John Radford**

What challenges did you face early in your career?

I really had no idea what I wanted to do, so challenges were more a matter of casting around and trying things out more or less unsuccessfully. Only when I got into lecturing, when I was already 33, did I think I might make a go of it, but even then I had no plan, I just tried to do what seemed to need doing.

You were the first Head of Psychology at what was then West Ham College of Technology, from 1965. One of several claims to fame is that you actually introduced psychology as an A-level subject, in 1970. What made you want to develop a psychology A-level syllabus in the first place?

I was involved in a BPS committee looking at the teaching of psychology in schools. We found that it was successful in other countries, and we could see no reason why it should not be done here. The Associated Examining Board (AEB) asked me to chair a group to prepare an A-level syllabus, and this seemed too good an opportunity to refuse. I didn't realise it would mean 10 years backbreaking work on top of everything else I had to do. But it was the start of a process that has led to hundreds of thousands of people getting some formal introduction to psychology. I think that is a good thing.

What obstacles did you come up against?

A-levels had to be approved by a body called the Schools Council, which was largely geared to schools rather than further education, the main activity of the AEB. Many people did not know anything about psychology ('Won't it make them very introspective?', I was asked). Some schools felt, reasonably, that their programmes were already very full and

could not accommodate a new subject. And within psychology, some felt that it was a subject that should be reserved for degree-level work. But, really, it went fairly well. The hard part was running the examination, initially devising 60 questions each year, marking all the answers, visiting every centre and interviewing every candidate, as there was an oral exam on practical work; and later coordinating and supervising further examiners.



Emeritus Professor John Radford
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How did you personally get interested in psychology?

While training – using the word very loosely – as a teacher, I got some psychology, mainly psychometrics and, oddly, C.G. Jung. I heard Cyril Burt give one of his last public lectures (there was a three-line whip on attendance), but remember little more than a distant small figure in round spectacles. Later I cast about for something to further my education and possibly prospects. Psychology seemed interesting, and I was fortunate to be accepted at Birkbeck for

a part-time degree. I asked the university careers service about job prospects and was told there were none in psychology and I should give it up. But I didn't.

Was there a tradition of psychology or scientific inquiry in your family?

Not at all. All the relatives I know about have been business people and professionals.

When you started the Psychology Department at the University of East London in the mid-1960s what models did you draw on from other universities as inspiration?

Birkbeck College, as it was then. In particular the easy informal relationship between staff and students, and the humane and eclectic approach to psychology itself. The quality of the actual teaching varied widely, but the best was also a model – and the worst a warning.

Which past or present psychologists do you most admire and why?

Francis Galton now gets a bad press as a supposed racist, but I admire his unbounded curiosity, his passion for measurement, and his identification of what I consider the central problem of psychology, individual differences. Donald Broadbent, whom I knew slightly, for his scientific achievements but even more for his integrity and generosity. In my experience he always had time for a personal approach despite a hectic programme.

How do you see the uptake of psychology as a university subject developing (or not!) in the future?

I suspect, as many do, that students will emphasise career prospects more. Psychology does not do very well in this regard, partly, in my view, because courses are too closely geared to the requirements of the BPS, which are themselves too narrow. BPS eligibility is appropriate to only 15–20 per cent of psychology graduates at most. There is almost no real research on what qualities psychology graduates actually possess that might make them employable. Employability is not the only end of higher education, but it is a very important one for most students. Recent regulations have made it harder to train to teach Psychology, and this may adversely affect pre-degree, and consequently degree, recruitment.

What notable trends in the teaching of

psychology have you observed over the last 50 years?

I don't think the actual teaching has changed as much as it should have, to take account of psychological research; for example, showing better ways than the traditional lecture, such as assisted study. Change is now constrained by pressures common to all subjects – increasing numbers, less time for student contact, administrative burdens, rigid course structures, and so on. More positively, there is increasing use of new technological resources.

Have these been for the good or ill for the discipline?

The shift from a 50:50 to a 20:80 male:female recruitment has, I suspect, moved the focus of the discipline in a 'female' direction, making it less balanced. Modular structures I think have reduced attention to less popular areas in particular history and theory. Both are unfortunate in my view.

If you were starting a psychology department from scratch today, what would you do differently from what you did in the mid-1960s?

It would depend on how free a hand I had. I might abandon the title Psychology, because it is seen as mainly suitable for women, in favour of something like Behavioural Sciences (of which psychology would be one). I would want to broaden the syllabus, at least in the first year, to introduce the principles of other related disciplines such as anthropology, history, computer science, law, etc. Overall I would put less emphasis on the 'what', and considerably more on the 'how' and 'why' of our attempts to understand our own species.

A Lifetime Achievement Award from the British Psychological Society for contributions to education in psychology means that you have sustained an active interest over a very extended period. What do you think enables you to do so?

Over 50 years now. Inertia perhaps. But I have simply remained fascinated by ever-advancing knowledge, and convinced of the importance of applying scientific methods to the enormous problems that confront us, nearly all the outcome of human behaviour. They will not be solved by chemistry, physics or engineering, nor by politics or law, important as all these and others are; even less by religion, tradition or prejudice, still too often the methods of choice.

What do you think are the hallmarks of

a good psychology teacher or lecturer?

They are the same as for all teachers, though psychologists ought to have a better grasp of them. There is no one best way of teaching, and exceptional teachers can be highly idiosyncratic. But centuries of experience and decades of research show that in general, good teachers are in command of and committed to their subject or discipline, are well-prepared, clear, and open to questions and discussion, relate material to practical or personal issues, and are concerned about every student and have time to interact with them, informally as well as formally. A counsel of perfection.

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Can such skills or attributes be taught?

Certainly, though as with all learning, some will do better than others.

What is the key issue in psychology at present?

One key issue in psychology as a discipline, that is a scientific inquiry, I think, is to integrate findings from an ever wider range of other disciplines. As a subject for teaching, two problems are to remedy the sex imbalance, and to provide for the majority of students who will not become professional psychologists. As a profession, a continuing problem is to get the importance of psychology across to decision makers and the general public.

Overall, it seems to me that the psychological profession has lost its final battle to remain independent, specifically from the medical one.

In terms of the Society, I am proud to

be a Fellow and an Honorary Life Member, and I hope that the Society will continue its scientific and professional functions. But I am out of the general fray and I don't know what the future holds.

If you were starting your career now, what areas of psychology would you view as most exciting as a researcher and educator, or attractive in career terms?

Scientifically, I think the rapidly widening sources of knowledge about behaviour are most exciting – not just obvious ones like genetics, evolutionary theory and neuroscience, but also less obvious such as history and religious studies. And the attempts to integrate it all. As a career, I don't know. Money lies in things like market research. In my own line, 20 years ago it was said that academics had been reduced to workers in the knowledge factories; now they seem to me more like slaves in the graduate mines. There are still compensations, but they are not in money or prestige.

What are the key issues for society and what value can psychology add?

It seems to me that throughout our history *H. sapiens* has been falling into self-dug pits, and just managing to scramble out. They are now deeper than ever – climatic change, preventable disease, famine, wars and conflicts, oppression and violence. The root of all these is human behaviour. H.G. Wells said at the end of his history of the world, the lesson is, now as ever, adapt or perish. We must change, and change rapidly. We must understand ourselves. That ultimately is what psychology is about.

Further reading

On the development of the A-level:

Radford, J. (2010, September). Forty years on.... *ATP Today*, pp.14–17.

On views about psychology and education in general:

Radford, J. (2012). Physician, heal thyself: A response to Hartley. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 18, 35–41.

Radford, J. (2003). The higher education context. In R. Bayne & I. Horton (Eds.) *Applied psychology*. London: Sage.

Radford, J. (in press). Applying psychology. In R. Bayne & G. Jinks (Eds.) *Applied psychology* (2nd edn). London: Sage.

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Radford, J. (2008). *A brief psychological autobiography*, Invited entry in the Oral History Project of the British Psychological Society. Text available from the author by e-mail (j.k.radford@btopenworld.com).