

# The pattern of History of Psychology teaching on British undergraduate Psychology<sup>1</sup> courses

Graham Richards, BPS History of Psychology Centre

---

*Teaching of History of Psychology is likely to become increasingly important as the British Psychological Society's 2002 guidelines for approved undergraduate courses are implemented. Results of a survey of History of Psychology teaching during the academic year 1999–2000 are summarised and discussed in the light of these new requirements. While now slightly dated, there is no reason to believe the situation has radically changed since these data were gathered. They suggest that only about a third of courses currently include substantial coverage of the topic and that the approaches and agendas of this teaching vary widely. Only a small minority actually appear to engage History of Psychology as an active and important sub-discipline in its own right. A variety of problems related to increasing the level and quality of History of Psychology content are identified and some tentative suggestions offered regarding the way forward.*

THE FIRST AIM of this paper is to present, a little belatedly, the findings of a survey of the situation regarding History of Psychology (HoP) teaching on undergraduate courses in Britain during the 1999–2000 academic year. Secondly the implications of this in the context of the new British Psychological Society guidelines for approved undergraduate courses will be identified and briefly discussed.

It is clear the British Psychological Society's Centenary in 2001 and associated events heightened awareness of HoP as a subdiscipline, and attracted attention to many of the issues with which HoP is currently concerned. These include, particularly, questions regarding the discipline's relationships with society at large and the various functions it has served in modernist cultures, as well as long-standing concerns about Psychology's scientific status and the controversy between those espousing a 'natural science' view of the discipline and those adopting what may rather inadequately be termed 'social constructionist' views. One outcome of the

Centenary interest in HoP was the creation of a History of Psychology Centre at the Society's London offices, which at last brought together the Society's archival collections and made them publicly available.

In Richards (1994) (in this journal) I attempted to make a case for reviving HoP's presence on undergraduate courses and pointed out that it had some 'natural allies' within the discipline, particularly among those of a critical persuasion in the social and developmental fields. The years since have seen a tremendous expansion of historical scholarship taking us ever further both from traditional celebratory approaches on the one hand and simplistic ideological critique on the other.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, although the situation has probably improved somewhat, particularly in terms of the way in which it is taught, HoP continues, as we will see, to have a somewhat patchy presence on the undergraduate curriculum and, perhaps more seriously, those teaching it lack any kind of consensus on the nature of the topic or the agenda they are pursuing. The majority of

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I am adopting my usual custom of capitalising Psychology/Psychological when using the term in the discipline sense and 'psychology/pyschological' when using it to refer to Psychology's subject-matter. The rationale for this is provided in Richards (2002a), Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> See Richards (2002a) chapter references for bibliographic details of much of this.

the new wave of scholarship mentioned previously remains largely invisible at the undergraduate level. The new BPS guidelines now explicitly include a requirement that theoretical and conceptual issues be covered. While not specifically identifying history as the route by which this should be achieved it is clearly, in association with Philosophical Psychology, one of the most appropriate.

In what follows I will first present the findings of a comprehensive survey of HoP teaching in Britain and Ireland during the year 1999–2000, and then proceed to some recommendations. I will not, here, be rehearsing yet again the case for the importance of the field (see e.g. Richards, 1994, 2002a, b and c; Jones & Elcock, 2001) other than to observe that it boils down to two key points. Firstly, as just suggested, it offers, in alliance with Philosophical Psychology, the most satisfactory strategy for tackling some core theoretical questions. Any undergraduate curriculum which cannot do this is surely failing to fulfil one of its most essential functions – showing students where the frontiers lie. Secondly, the absence of HoP leaves students in complete ignorance of a growing corpus of scholarship relating directly to the topics they are studying, scholarship which analyses, explains and sets in context the origins and subsequent success of present-day Psychological theories and practice. This is not a return to the older ‘heritage’ or ‘celebratory’ function, for it seeks to promote critical self-awareness and – dare one use the word? – ‘objectivity’ regarding the present, the very opposite of the previous agenda of simply justifying and celebrating it. In what follows the term ‘New Agenda’ will be used to refer, a little grandiosely, to this critical and contextualised approach to History of Psychology which has emerged since the mid-1980s.

We should though be wary of dismissing out of hand the more traditional views of HoP’s function in undergraduate teaching. In the light of what follows it is clear that while this New Agenda is being taught on a few courses, the prevailing perception

remains that the topic’s value lies in descriptively providing a ‘background’ of historical information about the famous figures and theories from which contemporary work emerged. This function is often advocated quite enthusiastically and it would be churlish in the extreme to say it should be merely brushed aside as based on an obsolete understanding of the topic. This would only serve to alienate potential allies. It is in any case unrealistic to imagine that students can be plunged in at the deep end without some basic descriptive chronological knowledge, especially when, as in about half the cases where it is taught, the survey reveals that HoP is a compulsory first-year introductory course rather than a second or third year option. Clearly some negotiation and compromise – from both sides – will be required if the New Agenda is to establish a regular place on first degree courses. I will be considering this issue again in due course, at this point I will rest with noting the two-fold difficulty: on the one hand the number of specialists in HoP is too small, on the other there is widespread ignorance of what it has to offer, occasionally amounting to outright hostility.

We may now turn to the survey findings.

### **History of Psychology Teaching 1999–2000**

In order to ascertain the current extent of History of Psychology teaching 99 questionnaires were circulated to British and Irish Republic university and college departments identified as offering undergraduate Psychology degree courses during the academic year 1999–2000 (see Appendix A). (While the resulting data is a little out of date there is no reason to think that the situation has radically changed in the meantime, particularly as many institutions have been awaiting the new BPS guidelines which were produced in 2002. As mentioned later, only three departments not teaching the subject had plans to do so in the future.) Of these 60 responded. With the addition of the author’s own department we have information on 61 courses.

*1. Proportion of degree courses offering HoP courses.*

Of these 61, 24 (39 per cent) either offer a HoP course or include it as a major component in a course with another name (such as 'Historical and Philosophical issues'). This figure includes one first-year course which was going to start in 2000–2001. A further 23 (39 per cent) only include historical material as introductory background on other courses (this often also occurs of course alongside specific courses) while 13 (22 per cent) do not cover it at all. Since we may plausibly assume that the 38 non-responding departments include a higher percentage of cases in the latter two categories we may reasonably conclude that HoP has an explicit presence on approximately a third of undergraduate honours Psychology degree courses currently being offered in Britain and Ireland (possibly less). In only 16 cases is HoP a staff member's major responsibility (either exclusively or jointly with another course). In one case two staff members have HoP as a joint major responsibility. Only 12 departments reported staff as academically active in HoP (in eight cases a single member, but one reported three as active), however, three of these are departments which do not actually offer a HoP course, thus only on nine courses are students taught by a research-active staff member.

Allowing for the strong possibility, mentioned previously, that this data overestimates the level of HoP teaching in undergraduate courses taken as a whole, it is clearly not a field which can be described as flourishing in Psychology teaching. It appears on probably less than a third of the courses, while in 10 per cent at most is there likely to be a member of academic staff who is research-active in the field. It should further be noted that since the BPS guidelines issue was not considered at the time this survey was conducted no data was obtained regarding whether or not HoP courses were compulsory or optional. Given that it is likely to be the latter when taught in Year 3, the proportion of courses on which it is a

compulsory course may well be no more than 20 per cent.

*2. When it is taught.*

At what point of the course is HoP taught? The picture here is neatly bi-modal, with 11 teaching it in Year 1, 10 in Year 3 and only two in Year 2 (in one further case it is taught on an undifferentiated Years 2/3 programme). Since we may infer that Year 1 courses are primarily of an introductory nature it would appear that the opportunity for more advanced study is present in about 20 per cent of the courses (21 per cent on our sample), but since, as we have seen, research-active staff are reported in only 12 per cent, this is, even so, likely to be an overestimate of what happens at the chalk-face.

This pattern reflects a longstanding dilemma about the placement of HoP. This may be summed by saying that if taught at the start students are not in a position to understand it, while if taught at the end it is too late for them to make full use of it. We will return to this issue in due course.

*3. Fragmentation*

The impression of fragmentation in how HoP is taught which arises from these last figures is reinforced when we consider the responses in more detail. Question 1 asked whether HoP was taught: (a) as a separate course; (b) as a major component of a course with a different title; (c) as introductory background on other course; and (d) not covered at all in any major fashion. The ratio of (a):(b) responses was 15:9, indicating that even where explicitly covered approaches are likely to vary considerably. This impression is confirmed when we consider Question 4, which asked for up to three textbooks recommended (if any). Of the 24 instances responding (a) or (b) to Question 1, six did not specify a main textbook. (Some of these used copies of selected primary source texts or concentrated on a primary source text.) Of the remainder only Leahey (2000, 5th ed.), *A History of Psychology. Main currents of psychological thought*, had a notably high

profile, with nine citations, followed by Richards (1996) *Putting Psychology in its Place* (six), and seven titles were cited twice (including Miller's *Psychology. The Science of Mental Life*, which, since it first appeared in 1962, is somewhat depressing – is there any other field of Psychology on which a lecturer would recommend a 1962 text *except* for historical reasons?) and 13 once.

Obviously, unlike mainstream topics such as perception, cognitive psychology and social psychology there is very little cross-teacher consensus on the merits of different textbooks except, to a limited extent, in the case of Leahey's – basically because it has been going so long. Leahey's text certainly does have considerable merits, notably because he has attempted to take on board some at least of the changes in approach and agenda of the last two decades. Several respondents commented on the lack of a suitable textbook, especially one appropriate for first-year courses. Richards (1996) was popular mainly among those explicitly supporting the New Agenda.

In this connection it is worth observing that until 2001 there was no textbook at all actually *on* HoP, Jones and Elcock (2001) have now taken a step in this direction at an introductory level. What we have had are numerous narratives *of* Psychology's history, often of a highly ritualised kind, as Smith (1988) noted some time ago. In other words there have been no texts which tell the student such things as what the issues are in contemporary HoP, what the different approaches to HoP are and have been, how to actually *do* HoP research or how to read primary historical texts. This is analogous to recommending a textbook on perception which said nothing about the design of experiments on perception. In the case of general 'History of Psychology' textbooks students are typically presented with the narrative itself as if it were its own self-sufficient evidence and the only story worth telling. This surely exacerbates the mismatch between HoP as presented in such texts (and understood by many of those teaching it)

and its contemporary character as an active field of research.

#### 4. Assessment

The picture regarding assessment is also varied. Crudely grouping responses to Q.5 into 'Examination', 'Essay/Coursework' and 'Mixed' the profile is six, eight and eight cases respectively, with two unascertainable (one being the course due to start 2000–2001, the other saying only 'part of general first-year assessment'). This masks some further divergence, for example one exam was of the multiple choice kind, and two courses included 'seminar' or 'presentation' in the coursework. Third-year courses tended to use essay-only assessment more frequently (five) than first-year courses (two), which is unsurprising. While we lack the data to determine whether HoP modes of assessment differ in their variability from those used for other subjects, there are other grounds for believing that it is a topic which requires further discussion, to which we will return.

#### 5. Likelihood of change

Finally, we should briefly note the responses to Question 7 on plans to change the coverage of HoP. There were seven 'yes' responses (all to increase coverage) but only three of these related to degree courses from which it was currently absent as a separate course. None reported intentions to drop it. While perhaps indicating some improvement in the picture, clearly no conclusions can be drawn from these figures with any certainty.

### Summary

To summarise the quantitative data this seems to suggest that HoP is taught only on about a third of undergraduate courses, being compulsory on perhaps a fifth. There is a symmetrical divide between it being taught on first and final years, and an apparently wide variation in the kinds of teaching materials used and approaches adopted. There is a hint, albeit a faint one, that its presence might possibly be increasing.

6. *Qualitative data.*

Turning to the qualitative questionnaire data elicited under Questions 8 and 9, we obtain a rather richer picture of the range of attitudes towards HoP and the variety of concepts of what it is. One certainly gets the impression that some of those teaching it are operating in something of a vacuum and that the content of their courses can be determined by their personal agendas, rather than related to what is going on in the field as a whole. Only one respondent expressed outright hostility to HoP:

*Do physics departments teach physics students the 'History of Physics'? A History of Psychology should be about history, it is not about psychology. (Question 8)*

*What generally passes as 'History of Psychology' is no more than third rate chronicling – historiographically and philosophically naive. And confusing to students attempting to understand a research-based science. (Question 9)*

More generally among non-teaching departments the reasons for its exclusion include:

(a) competing demands, e.g.

*Some individual appreciation of its importance – but Society requirements leave no room for it in a Joint Honours course. (Question 8)*

*Probably it is seen as a luxury and difficult to fit into competing demands on the curriculum. (Question 8)*

*I do not believe it is an issue for my colleagues.*

*We have recently re-written the course and reduced all contextual elements in favour of more cog. and bio (what fun). (Question 8)*

(b) feeling that coverage on other courses is sufficient:

*Can be covered adequately by being subsumed within 'substantive' content of the programme. (Question 8)*

*In general, staff feel that it is important to give historical context and that this is best provided as introduction to sub-disciplines within psychology. (Question 8)*

*Taught within relevant courses to set history of the discipline in the context of contemporary research and theory. Therefore, not seen as a*

*sub-area of Psychology in its own right. (Question 8)*

(c) perceived lack of student interest:

*Unfortunately, I feel that most of my staff are not interested in teaching the History of Psychology. This is partly because I believe it would be perceived poorly by current students. (Question 8)*

*General interest but not regarded as particularly interesting by first-year students. (Question 8)*

This last view is not however shared by all:

*Staff are interested in the history of our discipline, and weave relevant material into their courses e.g. phrenology and neuroscience. Students are, in general, fascinated by these links – even if the more cynical think in terms of 'reinventing the wheel'. Nevertheless, the focus of our courses is on contemporary psychology. (Question 8)*

Even so, not all respondents from non-teaching departments are happy about the situation:

*There is a growing feeling that the assumptions underlying current Psy. are not clear and that a historical perspective would make them more apparent. (Question 8)*

*I believe there should be more of it so that students appreciate where psychological ideas come from. (Question 9)*

*I strongly believe students should be aware of the origin + cross-fertilisation of ideas so that theories are not seen to just pop out of the ether and/or have independent existence. (Question 9)*

*I personally think the area deserves fuller treatment. (Question 9)*

And more wryly:

*During my training I benefited greatly from an exhilarating course in the H. of Psych. In today's curriculum there are seen to be too many new and exciting topics with great apparent 'relevance'. It would be difficult to teach the L & T committee to introduce H of Psych. (Question 9)*

What emerges from the non-teaching department responses generally is that outright hostility to HoP is rare, and that its absence is usually due to pragmatic

curriculum design/ staff interest concerns and/or complacency (or satisfaction) regarding the adequacy of its coverage on courses on other topics. There is little sense that it is really a specialist area in its own right, and few indications of much awareness of the character of contemporary HoP. On the other hand there are clearly individuals who are unhappy about the situation, some being fatalistic and a handful actively seeking to change things, although feeling beleaguered by indifference. The fact that usually HoP's exclusion does not apparently stem from any principled rejection is perhaps grounds for hope that the new GBR benchmarks could result in a significant rise in its wider academic and scholastic profile without too much resistance. Unfortunately this optimism is somewhat offset when we consider the previously noted point that the departments which do teach HoP by no means share a common view of the topic.

Broadly speaking there would appear to be three major approaches in play:

- a. Those actively engaged in HoP research, in contact with others in the field, involved in the New Agenda and in touch with the literature, are using it as a route for critically addressing the kinds of issue identified at the beginning of the paper, making links with other sub-disciplines and generally trying to enthuse their students and broaden their understanding of the nature of the subdiscipline as a whole. These will usually strive (not always successfully) to locate their courses in the second or third years. Although it is hard to be definitive, judging from their comments around nine (38 per cent of those teaching it) of those responding fall into this category.
- b. Those who view HoP more traditionally as a way of inducting students into the disciplinary 'culture' and as providing a descriptive chronological background of basic historical information about where current ideas originated. These will tend not to be research active, have a relatively

unsophisticated understanding of the nature of contemporary HoP and rely on textbooks of the more traditional kind which adopt a basically internalist, heroic and celebratory approach. These will see it primarily as first-year course, setting the scene for the remainder of the degree course as a whole. Among those in this category are, nonetheless, a number who are quite enthusiastic about HoP's value.

- c. Those who have a personal enthusiasm for some aspect of HoP related to their major research interests and theoretical position will tend to design their own courses with relatively little reference to the main HoP literature. Their agendas are likely to be in some degree 'presentist' – depicting a particular theoretical position as the legitimate heir of a tradition which can be cast as the authentic 'scientific' core of psychology. These will prefer teaching later rather than earlier, but may be happy to grab a slot opportunistically whenever it is available.

It would though be contrary to the New Agenda itself to see the situation solely in terms of the individual preferences and interests of those teaching HoP – or wanting to do so. Pressure on the curriculum to include 'relevant' courses (such as Counselling and Health Psychology), lack of interest among colleagues, perceived lack of interest among students, the nature of current modularised approaches to course design and the assumption that HoP work does not earn any RAE points are all mentioned as factors inhibiting the strengthening of its presence, personal enthusiasm notwithstanding.

Promoting HoP on undergraduate Psychology degree courses will, it seems, require something of a balancing act. Insofar as it is currently taught this is very often because either the lecturer, or his/her colleagues, see it as having a valuable 'servicing' role of the traditional kind. HoP is felt to be necessary because it provides students with some basic historical understanding of

the origins of the Psychology as practised today, without which their knowledge of the present is effectively knowledge in a vacuum. This servicing role can of course be played in several registers, from the celebratory and heroic, to a more down-to-earth 'learning lessons from past mistakes' approach, or focusing on intrinsically interesting (or even amusing) episodes and figures of some specific ethical, methodological or theoretical significance. To suggest that HoP specialists should henceforth high-mindedly eschew this role would be a grave mistake, as was observed previously. What is needed is the development of an approach which continues to meet this felt need but at the same time enables the New Agenda itself to be introduced to students and enables specialist HoP staff to establish an academic position and status comparable to those of specialists in other subdisciplines. Everyone thinks they can cover history – and up to a point they are probably right, inasmuch as this involves only telling some sorts of historical narratives. However, when it comes to evaluating the respective merits of different narratives, doing historical research, and using history to address the kinds of issue with which the New Agenda is concerned, then we are surely dealing with a specialism of the same order as any other within Psychology. One obvious option would be to try and recruit those currently teaching HoP in more traditional ways, encouraging them to engage more actively with contemporary scholarship and to undertake research of their own.

The new guidelines have however now added a fresh factor to the situation and it is with reference to the requirement that coverage of theoretical and conceptual issues be a mandatory component in the curriculum that the best chances of promoting HoP lie

### **History of Psychology in the new curriculum**

What follows is intended only as a brief personal reflection on the problems and

possibilities. Striking the balance between the demands just identified remains a major consideration, but we may perhaps start by making the stress on HoP theoretical relevance more explicit. The nature of the HoP syllabus certainly needs to be reconsidered.

The traditional syllabus has tended to be highly 'internalist' in character, typically tracking a succession of theories and 'great men'. In the US, though less so in Britain, the story is generally begun with the Greeks and the Galenic 'humours', followed, on both sides of the Atlantic, by Descartes, Locke and the major schools of Enlightenment philosophy (although the Scottish 'Common Sense' or 'Realist' school of Reid tended to get short shrift until relatively recently, despite being, arguably, the closest to modern Psychology in its concerns). Phrenology (but rarely Lavater's physiognomy) and Mesmerism are often mentioned also, but primarily as curious anticipations of later developments. Psychology proper is then ritually pursued through Wundt, Darwin and Galton, William James and the American 'New Psychology' of the 1880s and 1890s, Behaviourism, Gestalt Psychology, Psychoanalysis, intelligence testing and Cognitive Psychology. Developmental, Comparative and Social Psychology may also receive some separate coverage (particularly regarding Piaget, ethology and attitude-testing respectively). (Which is not to deny that individual teachers will focus on their topics of special interest, or that historical coverage of e.g. perception or memory might not be provided elsewhere as background to courses on those fields.) This largely ritualised agenda is to a great extent determined by the content of the textbooks usually employed, which follow a similar trajectory

For historians of Psychology pursuing the 'New Agenda' this approach has some rather obvious flaws, even allowing for the fact that such a syllabus need not necessarily be taught in an outdated 'celebratory' or 'heroic' fashion. The most serious shortcomings may be identified as the following:

- It will neglect the complex relationship between developments within the discipline and the cultural, economic and psychological contexts in which it is being practised, giving a false impression of Psychological theories as autonomous intellectual creations;
- It gives a misleading picture of clearcut periodisation – introspection followed by behaviourism followed by cognitivism for example – which mythologises the very complicated historical realities, thereby obscuring the perennial internal diversity of Psychology while giving the impression that there is a non-controversially progressive scientific core lineage of theories;
- It leaves unaddressed a number of historical questions of paramount importance, particularly regarding methodology (see e.g. Danziger, 1990; Gigerenzer, 1996) and the relationship between the discipline and its subjects, both human and animal; these would include the nature of Psychology's dealings with children, women, 'race' issues, sexuality, primates and those with learning difficulties;
- Related to the first point, it similarly leaves unaddressed equally important issues such as Psychology and war, Psychology and religion and Psychology's relations to mass media and mass culture generally;
- Finally, the effect of all this is to render it very difficult to move from the level of understanding Psychological work in its own terms to working towards a more reflexive understanding of the discipline's character as a whole, and the relationship between 'Psychology' and 'psychology'.<sup>3</sup>

These shortcomings all pertain, directly or indirectly, to precisely the kinds of theoretical and conceptual issues with which psychologists in general are currently engaged: the extent to which psychology can legitimately be considered a 'natural science', psychology's relationships to, and roles within, society as a whole, ethical questions, the reflexivity conundrum, and how far the discipline's own subject matter ('psychology') changes over time and is historically or culturally constituted.

Having said this however, we need to acknowledge that some basic level of fundamental internalist knowledge is essential. The failure of the traditional syllabus is not that it is wrong, but that it is incomplete and that this very incompleteness yields a misleading picture. As already indicated, we need to find an approach which provides a forum for the New Agenda while at the same time recognising the legitimacy of some of the more traditional concepts of HoP's role on undergraduate degree courses. One central problem is that of time. It is difficult enough cramming the traditional agenda into 10 to 15 hours in anything like a comprehensive fashion, adding the kinds of coverage just alluded to amounts to something like a doubling of the material one would ideally like to cover. Moreover, if the topic becomes compulsory, essay assessment methods will also come under pressure. As noted previously, these are currently widely used on third-year courses, where the topic tends to be an optional module, and most of those active in the field would probably feel that essays provide students with the best opportunity to engage with the subject in a constructive fashion. Again, even leaving resource questions aside, the time pressure would be exacerbated if the extended essay mode of assessment was being used on cohorts numbering in three figures.

---

<sup>3</sup> There is an affinity between this last point and the situation which obtained in mid-20th century philosophy teaching. In both Psychology and philosophy the historical text is treated as a current one with a transparently self-evident meaning. Authors are viewed as peers making contributions to the same debates we are now engaged in. Only slowly has appreciation dawned of the extent to which the meaning of historical texts can be quite opaque, requiring some hermeneutic and contextualising effort to appraise, and that the authors often had aims very different to our own.

Returning to curriculum content, what then can be sacrificed from the old-style 'internalist' story? And how far can 'sacrifice' be minimised by adopting a changed approach to traditional topics? One, perhaps draconian, first move would be to dramatically reduce coverage of anything pre-1800. Although this period is absolutely fascinating and provides the deep background for numerous Psychological traditions and ideas it is highly debatable whether two or three lectures (at most) on a Psychology degree course can serve much purpose. To grasp the pre-1800 period properly requires a fairly thorough grounding both in philosophy and general history (as well as some history of science). A philosophy degree will typically involve an entire course on Descartes alone. Reducing events to what can be covered in two or three hours (even allowing for additional reading) can but produce a caricature of pre-1800 thought. Insofar as this phase is covered it should be very much from the perspective of identifying specific proto-Psychological work and episodes, rather than treating entire philosophical systems as quasi-Psychological theories before the fact – which for the most part they were not. We have, in fact, to be up-front with our students, telling them that an adequate understanding of Psychology's deeper, pre-1800 roots in philosophy, early physiology, Enlightenment linguistics, proto-psychiatry and educational writings, etc., is simply beyond the remit of an undergraduate course on the history of modern Psychology. The continued inclusion of this period is largely an inertial legacy from the pre-Second World War period, when Psychology's own history was still brief, and when locating its roots in Aristotle and Plato was a useful rhetorical move – convincing students they were the heirs of a tradition going back to antiquity (Smith, 1988). An entirely separate optional course on pre-1850 proto-Psychological thought and its Psychological significance might be offered if there is a staff member willing to do so. Failing that we would be best advised to offer

a single lecture explaining the very interesting reasons why we cannot cover it, and merely sign-posting the material we are regretfully leaving aside. It perhaps ought to be admitted also that students temperamentally inclined towards an interest in this are relatively less likely to have chosen to do a Psychology degree in the first place than to have opted for philosophy or history. (Joint Psychology and Philosophy degree students are a special case, but are best placed to draw the connections themselves.)

Before proceeding any further it would be useful to reconsider the placement of HoP within the three-year course. If the new benchmarks resulted in increased coverage the dilemma between first- and third-year placement might evaporate. One solution which could become viable in these circumstances would be for some kind of history component to be included throughout the course offering an on-going commentary, so to speak, on the other courses being taught at the same time. This could be incorporated into a broader course which included less obviously history-related conceptual, theoretical or philosophical issues.

Whatever the solution in terms of explicit content, to meet the needs of the new curriculum we certainly must address those shortcomings identified above. There are though some practical difficulties facing those teaching HoP which will, if anything, be rendered even more acute by so doing.

- Incoming students who are school-leavers will, even if they have a Psychology A-level, know virtually nothing about Western intellectual history in general, let alone the history of Psychology. The only two relevant figures they are likely to have heard of are Darwin and Freud. Unless they have done modern history at some point (and remembered it) their image of the past two centuries will be patchy and bizarre. (If unfair to the minority of more high-flying students with an autodidactic intellectual streak, this is hardly inaccurate as far as the majority are

concerned.) This places us in a very difficult position, in which what is really required is a preliminary crash-course on the history of western culture, science and ideas since 1600. A general course somewhat in this spirit has long been widely taught in the US to all 'freshmen', but they have four, rather than three, years to play with. There is, moreover, no guarantee that they will be much better informed by the third year. How we address this is one of the questions requiring urgent discussion.

- Appropriate teaching resources are particularly problematic in many institutions, particularly with regard to access to primary texts and early testing materials, etc. This means that all too often both students and lecturers are reliant on secondary sources and neither are in a position to do any actual research – raising further difficulties regarding any non-exam method of assessment. Even back runs of the leading journals in the field are not held by many college libraries, nor are they subscribed to. (In actual fact working copies of most 20th century Psychology classics, especially American ones, can currently be acquired on the web for under £10, so building up a basic collection would not be that expensive.) Again, a debate regarding possible solutions to this problem is badly needed.
- Most serious however is the need for staff able and willing to teach HoP courses. There are, in Britain, no postgraduate courses in HoP (most of those with any

postgraduate training have acquired it in Canada or the US, or entered the subject via History of Science or Medicine following undergraduate history degrees). The majority of British historians of Psychology are either autodidacts, or have come to the topic from other disciplines. In the latter case their orientations and agendas may differ significantly from those pertinent to a Psychology degree course. This problem cannot be fully solved on a short time-scale.

All this may sound rather pessimistic. This is to ignore the extent to which HoP has already succeeded in raising its profile over the last decade, albeit somewhat slowly. Certainly the situation has improved considerably since the author's 1994 paper in this journal. (Even so, membership of the History and Philosophy Section of the Society has remained effectively static.) HoP, as currently being practised, offers, I believe, a unique and exciting route for meeting the new Society requirement for coverage of theoretical and conceptual issues. If it is to fulfil its potential in this respect it will be necessary for those actively engaged in the field to make a collective effort at finding ways of overcoming the serious problems identified in this paper.

### **Correspondence**

**Professor Graham Richards**

BPS History of Psychology Centre,  
33 John Street, London WC1N 2AT.  
E-mail: [graric@bps.org.uk](mailto:graric@bps.org.uk)

## References

- Danzinger, K. (1990). *Constructing the subject: Historical origins of psychological research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gigerenzer, G. (1996). From tools to theories: Discovery in cognitive psychology. In C.F. Graumann & K.J. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical dimensions of psychological discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, D. & Elcock, J. (2001). *History and theories of psychology: A critical perspective*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Leahey, T.H. (2000). *A history of psychology: Main currents in psychological thought* (5th ed.). Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Miller, G.A. (1964). *Psychology: The science of mental life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Richards, G. (1994). Resurrecting the history of psychology. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 3(2), 75–100.
- Richards, G. (1996). *Putting psychology in its place. An introduction from a critical historical perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Richards, G. (2002a). *Putting psychology in its place. A critical historical overview* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Richards, G. (2002b). The psychology of Psychology: An historically-grounded sketch. *Theory & Psychology*, 12(1), 7–36.
- Richards, G. (2002c). History of Psychology: The discipline of the future. *History & Philosophy of Psychology*, 4(1), 13–22.
- Smith, R. (1988). Does the history of psychology have a subject? *History of the Human Sciences*, 1(2), 147–177.

## Appendix

### Survey questionnaire

The following questionnaire was circulated during 2000 to 100 Psychology departments in Britain and the Irish Republic. Some answer spaces have been reduced here for space reasons.

### Teaching History of Psychology Questionnaire

**Name of university or college:** .....  
(No department will be identified in any publication arising from or incorporating the findings of this survey.)

#### Respondent:

Head of Department  Lecturer responsible for course   
(please tick as appropriate)

1. Is History (or 'History and Theory') of Psychology taught  
(a) as a separate course?   
(b) as a major component of a course with a different title? \*   
(c) as introductory background on other courses?   
(d) not covered at all in any major fashion?   
If 'yes' to (b) please specify: If answering 'yes' to only (c) or (d) please move to Question 6.
2. At what level(s) in the degree course is this subject taught?  
1st year  2nd year  3rd year  (tick as appropriate)
3. Is there a staff member whose teaching responsibility lies primarily in this field (or this field jointly with one other)? YES  NO   
If jointly, what is their other main teaching subject?.....
4. Which textbooks (if any) are recommended/ required? (Do not list more than three)  
(a.) .....  
(b.) .....  
(c.) .....
5. How is the course (or its History of Psychology component)  
(a.) assessed?   
(b.) weighted?
6. Are any staff members research-active in this field? YES  NO   
If 'Yes', how many? .....

7. Do you have any plans to change coverage of History of Psychology?  
YES  NO   
If 'Yes' please specify:

.....  
.....

If you have time we would also appreciate your views on the following two questions.

8. How would you characterise the general attitude(s) towards History of Psychology currently prevailing in your department?

.....  
.....

9. Do you have any further comments to make regarding the role of History of Psychology on the undergraduate course and/or how it is taught, either in your department or generally?

.....  
.....