

Explaining the popularity of psychology at A-level

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The sustained rise in popularity of psychology both at degree and A-level in the UK over the last two decades is a remarkable event, not only because it is indicative of wider cultural changes but because it is understudied by psychologists themselves and not predicted by curriculum planners. The aim of this article is to offer a theoretical context for this phenomenon in the hope of stimulating discussion and research.

It is argued that the consumerisation of education in the UK from the 1980s onward coupled with an individualistic culture in which student choice is promoted contributes to an educational environment which focuses on the personal. Also the nature of adolescent identity in western societies and the pressure within the UK education system for career decisions to be made at 16 both serve to create a situation where the promise of the 'study of one's self' (as psychology is often perceived by those who have yet to study it) becomes a popular option.

Keywords: *A-level psychology; adolescent identity; social constructionism; consumerisation of education.*

Part One: The phenomenal rise of psychology at A-level.

MODERN PSYCHOLOGY was very much a product of the US and has been thoroughly integrated into the high school system, as Gergen (1991, p.30) notes 'by 1940 psychology was a major feature in most university curricula in the US. By 1970 it was one of the most popular student majors in the country.' It's taken longer in the UK but now it has become established as the second most popular subject at university (Morris, 2003).

In the UK it is at A-level over the past 20 years that the trend is most apparent and has become an established feature of 16 to 19 education. From its inception in the early 1970s when A-level psychology was virtually exclusive to the FE sector its entry numbers have risen dramatically year on year until the curriculum reform of 2001 when it had reached the top 10 of popular subjects, defined in terms of the percentage of candidates entered relative to the total number of entries.

Table 1 shows that this is far from a passing fashion, with over 50,000 students completing the A-level in 2009 (over 80,000

at AS), it is now the fourth most popular subject (JCQ, 2009). This is all the more remarkable given that most students have no exposure to the subject before KS5 and that most universities do not insist on it in making conditional offers, even for degrees in psychology (McGuinness, 2003). At AS the picture is the same, with over 80,000 candidates in 2009, where psychology beats biology into fourth place. Amongst girls psychology is the second most popular subject after English; clearly a phenomenon worthy of study, but beyond the scope of this article.

Consider also that this is not something that has been planned, imposed or predicted by the curriculum planners themselves, unlike General Studies, which is compulsory in many sixth forms and colleges. In the space of a few years psychology has risen to become the most popular non-national curriculum A-level subject, purely as a result of student choice. A remarkable event in itself; remarkable even more so is the almost complete lack of research into the phenomena and the continued insistence by many in the educational community that it is still a passing fad.

Table 1: The position of psychology in the top 10 UK A-level subjects from 2001–2010.
(Based on relative percentages of candidates entered in the UK in each year. Source JCQ)

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
1st	Gen S	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng
2nd	Eng	Gen S	Gen S	Gen S	Gen S	Gen S	Maths	Maths	Maths
3rd	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths	Bio	Maths	Gen S	Bio	Bio
4th	Bio	Bio	Bio	Bio	Maths	Bio	Bio	Gen S	Psych
5th	Chem	Hist	Hist	Psych	Psych	Psych	Psych	Psych	Gen S
6th	Hist	Chem	Psych	Hist	Hist	Hist	Hist	Hist	Hist
7th	Geog	Geog	Art	Art	Art	Art	Art	Art	Art
8th	Bus S	Art	Chem	Chem	Chem	Chem	Chem	Chem	Chem
9th	Art	Psych	Geog	Geog	Geog	Geog	Media	Media	Media
10th	Psych	Bus S	Bus S	Bus S	Bus S	Bus S	Geog	Geog	Geog

It is worth noting that this growth is not unique to A-level. Scotland has its own system and according to the Scottish Association of Psychology Teachers (APTS, 2009) the rate of growth is compatible with that of the rest of the UK; if a few years behind. Internationally the picture is more difficult to interpret, mostly because the idea of such wide student choice at this stage is alien to many educational systems. The newly-formed European Federation of Psychology Teachers Associations provides a review of different countries provision (EFPTA, 2009). Where student choice is a feature, psychology appears to be flourishing; but it is also present as a curriculum element in more centrally planned systems.

That the international and historical context is part of the wider picture is not disputed, but for the purposes of this article the aim will be to focus on explanations for the sustained rise of psychology at A-level within the UK.

Part Two: Research and explanations – the story so far.

In his teacher’s guide Jarvis (2006, p.3) offers three suggestions for the popularity of A-level Psychology.

- i. **The Rigour Hypothesis** – psychology is selected at A-level because it is perceived

as an easy option by students, or was promoted by institutions to enable them to boost their value added scores and league table positions.

- ii. **The Intrinsic Interest Hypothesis** – where ‘interest’ is regarded as the students primary motivation.
- iii. **The Therapy Hypothesis** – here students are ‘interested’ to understand themselves because of perceived personal and mental health issues.

The **Rigour Hypothesis** appears to be the easiest to dismiss. Friz-Gibbon and Vincent (1994) compared A-level grades with a range of performance indicators including GCSE results and found that comparable students received higher grades in psychology than maths and the natural sciences. Morris (2003) points out that a higher proportion of A-level psychology students were in FE colleges in 1993, those students who performed well at GCSE were more likely to stay onto sixth forms who offered only traditional science subjects. By 2003 the situation had changed dramatically and science subjects had shown greater grade inflation, with twice as many students obtaining an A grade in maths as in psychology. Morris concluded that ‘current data might suggest that it is mathematics, physics and chemistry that are the easy options’ (p.510).

More recent QCA research broadly supports the view that psychology is no less demanding than other subjects.

But when they compared psychology, biology and sociology A-levels, psychology was seen as the strongest subject in some areas. The report said: 'Psychology was judged to be technically demanding and made use of complex concepts. 'Given that the initial impetus for the work was the suggestion that students were turning away from science to psychology because it was perceived to be the soft option, the study suggests this perception has little basis in fact.' *The Times* (2008)

However, trying to claim some objective standard of difficulty which can meaningfully be applied across subjects is a difficult if not impossible task. Rather like the experience of pain, the 'difficulty' of a subject is actually experienced by the learner and is not solely determined by the examiners. It's similar to a doctor telling you that you should not be experiencing any pain now, or a maths teacher telling you how easy the equation is.

More pertinent to the debate is the research into student perceptions by Hirschler and Banyard (2003) who found that of their sample of 454 graduate Psychology students 43 per cent regarded it as more difficult than other subjects whilst only 27 per cent found it less so. However, these were a self-selected sample in that they choose the subject at university. Comparative data for all subjects from representative samples does not appear to exist. In my own research (discussed in more detail later) this did not feature as a factor, although researcher bias could mask the effect as students and teachers of psychology may have an ego protective investment in the difficulty of their subject.

This brings us to the **Intrinsic Interest Hypothesis**. Morris (2003) goes on to cite my research to suggest 'that students choose psychology because they are *interested* in its subject matter' and that 'People are *naturally* interested in understanding human experience and behaviour' (p.511, my italics).

My own research included grouping students answers to the question 'why did you choose to study psychology?' from an induction questionnaire and asking a cohort of A-level students from my own institution to rank them according to importance. These were then compared with a small sample of colleagues attending an Association of Teachers of Psychology conference (Walker, 2004). The exercise was repeated in five other institutions with first year A-level psychology students and a broadly similar picture emerged (see Figure 1 overleaf).

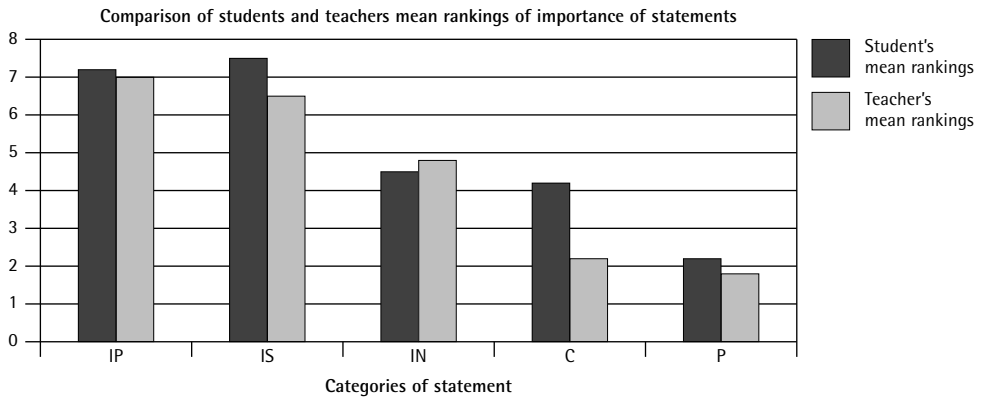
The following is from the conclusions section of my report (Walker, 2004).

Consideration of the results of the various methods of investigation leads to the conclusion that the **principal motivation is to increase their understanding of themselves and others**. The interview data suggests that they do this to increase their own personal effectiveness in their interaction with others. The desire to use this understanding to help others is more apparent in those who have some relevant personal experiences.

Jarvis (2006, pp.4–6) makes much of this, it also clearly supports the professions preferred view of itself; however, this is rather tautological given that it is based upon views collected by a teacher, of their own students and from colleagues.

I did attempt to distinguish between 'interest in subject' (IS) and 'interest in people' (IP), a distinction which I was forced to admit dissolved at the interview stage. Perhaps this is an example of the way in which a researcher can lose their critical faculties when the gaze is turned inward. A critic could suggest that there is too easy acceptance of the term '*interest*' without asking what makes something interesting and why. Given that my own students were often at a loss to explain what it was that interested them, the idea that they could shed light on why this was the case seems flawed.

Figure 1: Students and teachers mean rankings of statements.
 IP = Interest in People; IS = Interest in Subject; IN = Interested by Novelty factor;
 C = fits Career path; P = Personal reasons (Walker, 2004).



The use of the term ‘*naturally*’ also can not escape scrutiny. In this context it seems to imply normative behaviour; that being interested in psychology is somehow normal, perhaps even inevitable. I will argue later that what now appears a *natural* interest in the context of our culture is a relatively recent phenomena linked to the rise of a socially constructed self-identity and the role of individual agency to contribute to that construction. The Intrinsic Interest Hypothesis, therefore, lies deconstructed, awaiting my later attempts to use it as raw material in constructing a theoretical position.

Finally the **Therapy Hypothesis** which is dismissed by Jarvis with my unwitting collaboration thus:

‘Surveys of students’ subject choice-motives, such as those of Hirscher and Banyard (2003) and Walker (2004), have not revealed significant numbers of students suggesting that their subject choice was motivated by therapy-seeking. Indeed, Walker went on to directly investigate the therapy hypothesis by means of interviewing students, and in no case did his participants report a therapeutic motive’ (Jarvis, 2006, p.6)

I am reminded of the researcher who concluded that his female participants had repressed their memories of (documented)

childhood sexual abuse because they did not mention them at interview.

These findings are subject to an alternative explanation.

Those students who initially had a ‘Therapy Focus’ have had time to discover more about what studying Psychology entails and therefore modified their views by the summer term. Another factor is the fact that the teacher who has repeatedly claimed to be ‘not a counsellor’ and has explained that studying Psychology is not psychotherapy is the same person who is asking the questions in the interview. The Therapy Hypothesis, therefore, refuses to go away completely (Walker, 2004).

The idea that the therapy hypothesis can be tested at all is questionable; certainly any attempt to do so would present considerable ethical challenges. My speculation that the 21 per cent of my original sample that itemised personal issues in the induction questionnaire was ‘probably higher than would be expected generally in this age group’ is completely unsubstantiated. Any statistics that do exist are likely to be difficult to interpret, looking either at only identified, diagnosed prevalence or self-report measures of dubious reliability.

Psychology itself should warn us about been so quick to rush to judgement. Attribution theory would predict the following self-serving bias for teachers; students choose your subject, not because it's easy or because they are 'sick' but because it's so fascinating. For students too, unwilling to admit to psychopathology or that they had chosen badly, the notion of interesting preserves their ego-integrity. Surely it is a forlorn hope that a picture could emerge of the motivations of the students concerned given that the investigator setting the questions, conducting the interviews and interpreting the data was also the source of knowledge about psychology for these students from day one.

Furedi (2004) would argue that the study of psychology itself contributes to the **Therapy Culture** in which such personal issues are likely to be promoted and therefore increase the prevalence. Indeed the rise of the Therapy Culture as documented by Furedi closely parallels that of A-level psychology.

Part Three: The argument – enter social constructionism.

Firstly let us return to the original data under consideration and consider its context. Psychology at A-level was introduced in 1971 and its period of fastest growth corresponded to the rise of Thatcherism. The culture of consumerism and deference to market forces was deliberately applied to the state education sector as far as possible. The climate of competition between providers of post-16 education, and the commercialisation of exam boards were also critical factors which enabled the choice of consumers, both students and to a lesser extent their parents to become powerful factors. Under these new funding arrangements many secondary schools felt compelled to compete with the FE sector and offer psychology to avoid losing the financial viability of their sixth forms. Despite the centralisation of education and the introduction of a national curriculum the ideology of 'individual choice' meant

that student preferences were driving provision.

This may have been a necessary precondition but it does not explain why psychology made progress at the expense of other new and traditional A-level subjects. The role of choice is significant here, it assumes that the consumer has the capacity to choose, it assumes a coherent, indivisible 'self' able to employ agency and rationality. It thrusts on the student the responsibility of making an 'informed' choice. A choice which assumes not only an awareness of the options available but also psychological constructs such as their own strengths and abilities perhaps even a sense of 'vocation'. It is this element which brings psychology more sharply into focus. In short the student needs some 'self' knowledge of the kind not featured in the traditional subject based secondary curriculum. Psychology appears to offer this understanding; it is this that provides the 'interest' for the student. Psychology promises to be about 'selves', theirs and others. The very process of making up ones mind about one's 'self' fosters an anxious curiosity to find out more about it.

Social constructionism enables us to view the wider context of the phenomena under scrutiny. Burr (1995) expresses it in this way ...Social constructionist theory has moved the centre of attention out of the person and into the social realm. Psychology, within this framework, becomes the study of a socially constructed being, the product of historically and culturally specific discourses, which bring with them a complex network of power relations. It embeds the person in a historical, social and political fabric from which it cannot be teased out and studied independently. (Burr, 1995, p.111)

A social constructionist perspective on the enterprise of psychology could run as follows. As a product of the modernist era psychology set out to apply the principles of science to the 'human condition'. To create

'objective' unchanging facts based about the Self. Social Constructionists have argued that the assumptions inherent within the language used to describe the self produce an illusion of a self-determining, rational being.

For Harre (1989) this means that our selfhood in Western industrialised societies is a product both of our use of words such as 'I' and 'me' and of the themes such as choice, decision making, exhortation and so on. Traditional perspectives such as psychoanalysis and cognitive/developmental psychology reinforce this view of an essentially individual self that possesses discrete emotions, memories, attitudes and motivations. It follows from this that these can be measured by the tools of psychometrics. Psychology has, therefore, fostered a discourse of the measurable (and, therefore, 'objective') individual self and set this as the standard against which to measure such intangibles as self-actualisation, self-esteem and personality.

As the anthropologist Geertz (1979, p.229) writes:

'The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement and action, organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.'

The work of Cooley and Mead which were later labelled Symbolic Interactionism is one of the roots of social constructionism (Burr, 1995). The nature of the relationships with significant others provide the means to conceptualise or construct a version of the self. As society becomes more complex and more social interactions become possible then several versions of the same self concept are likely to co-exist. This is particularly so of adolescents' in Westernised cultures where significant others can include

a diversity of peers and celebrities, with relationships mediated by technologies from TV to Facebook.

Erikson (1968) initially came up with the concept of **identity diffusion** in adolescence. This suggests that the typical adolescent faces an identity crisis which needs to be resolved before they pass into adulthood. James Marcia (1980) developed these ideas and proposed the identity state of **Moratorium** in which adolescents' have the space to actively explore and consider alternate identities. From this it could be assumed that the 'natural' choice of subjects for an individual in that state would be psychology.

One difficulty with this idea is that research by sociologists (Coleman & Hendry 1990) suggests that such anxiety driven crisis does not characterise most adolescents experience and that they tend to focus on and resolve one issue at a time as they encounter the transition from the role of 'teenager' to that of adult in our society. Also as Durkin (1995) points out also that the status of adolescence is specific to Western individualised cultures where the self construct is more independent in contrast to collectivistic cultures which have a more interdependent construct. This does not invalidate the argument because the phenomenon that we are considering is similarly time locked and culture bound, but it does suggest that we need to go beyond the individual psyche to understand the social factors involved.

Gergen (1991) coined the term 'multiphrenia' to describe the state of permanent identity crisis which he claims to be a feature of post-modern life. In the *Saturated Self* he argues that emerging communication technologies have contributed to a bewildering array of possible relationships. Students, therefore, look to psychology at A-level as the means to help them understand their 'selves'; to clarify their confusion; to overcome their state of identity diffusion.

This approach suggests that the popularity of psychology, at A-level and beyond, is a consequence of the clash of modernist and postmodern cultures, a collision of

discourses on the nature of selfhood. As Usher and Edwards (1994, p.24) point out:

...education is so central to the post-enlightenment, emancipatory, liberal-humanist project of modernism. Education is the 'dutiful child' of the enlightenment, where 'the project of modernity is deeply intertwined with education'.

Yet today students are subject to all the influences of the post-modern peer culture around them. The popularity of social networking sites and the use of text messaging means that they are 'in relationship' as never before. Of all groups in Western post-industrial societies, young people have perhaps the most saturated (in Gergen's terms) selves. This brings us back to Erikson's concept of identity diffusion, but in a culturally specific context.

So sixth-formers choose psychology because they are living in a society with a proliferation of relationships and during adolescence the education system pressures them to create a discrete identity to participate in a modernist world order which no longer exists outside of the classroom. Psychology appears to offer a means to define and construct an identity in relation to others, a hope that is inevitably dashed as contemporary psychology offers not one but many variations on the theme of human nature.

Part Four: Evaluating the argument – and cross-cultural reflections.

If the position outlined above is accepted then it follows that certain predictions could be made. Firstly that the popularity of psychology at A-level will be maintained, certainly as long as our education system promotes student choice and that compatible qualifications will prosper in a similar educational milieu. This does seem to be the case as evidenced by the sustained top position of the qualification relevant to others as shown in Figure 1 and in the growing popularity of the Scottish equivalent and at GCSE when it is available. It would be interesting to research the impact that introducing GCSE

psychology has on its impact at A-level. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it leads to a reduction, perhaps because students have discovered that it does not unlock the secrets of their adolescent identity.

Another way of evaluating this explanation is to see if it predicts the growth of psychology in societies which have more recently embraced consumerism; such as China.

China's move toward a market economy has brought more prosperity and economic freedom to the Chinese people. But those changes also appear to have wrought more psychological unrest, says Beijing psychologist Houcan Zhang, PhD. Unemployment has sparked increased levels of depression. Divorce rates are up. And thoughts of the future make people anxious; particularly those who live in such highly developed commercial cities as Shenzhen, Shanghai and Beijing. In response, just as China has adopted Western economic ideas, so too has it embraced psychology to deal with its newfound challenges. In fact, psychology, largely considered a pseudoscience by the Chinese just 25 years ago, has become a fast-growing, well-respected field, said Zhang, a psychology professor at Beijing Normal University. (APA, 1998)

This rather dated extract could be used by critics such as Furedi (2004) as further evidence of the globalisation of therapy culture. However, look a little deeper and it shows clear signs of cultural imperialism, the unwritten assumption is that China has embraced Western psychology, implying its transcendence and superiority. More recently psychology has been included in the list of 16 compulsory school subjects, so student choice is not a factor here. Also on closer inspection the psychology that has been taught owes more to Confucianism and Chinese thought than to Western empiricism (Yang 1999). The indigenous psychologies of China and India have a more collectivistic, narrative concerning the self (Bond, 1997).

When considering centuries rather than decades the popularity of A-level psychology may well be a passing fad. Perhaps the emerging different narratives of the self from economically powerful cultures will come to eclipse our own, rather distorted vision. In a curriculum less dominated by the discourse of choice may arise a different, less individualistic, perhaps less popular, version of psychology.

A problem with this type of circumstantial evidence is that it can be used to support alternative theoretical perspectives. More empirical evidence is difficult to obtain due to the reflexive nature of the process and structure that language imposes on interaction between researcher and participant. My own research falls into this trap. If these reflections serve to stimulate pedagogical debate amongst teachers of psychology then that would be a good starting point.

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