

The evolution of the Society

ON 24 October 1901 the Psychological Society ('British' was added in 1906) was formed by nine men and one woman in a meeting at University College London. One hundred years after its start we have over 30,000 members, responsibility for 10 journals and *The Psychologist*, chartering, and the prospect of statutory registration.

One of the things that historical research emphasises is that it is difficult to take a simple slice through time and say, for example, that the BPS started in 1901. What might have led to the meeting that Sully called? Why did it take until 1901 for the Society to be formed? (See also 'Founding factors', *The Psychologist*, August 2001.)

Richards (2001) points out that there had been an earlier attempt to create a society devoted to British psychology. In 1875 Edward Cox, with seven other people, formed the Psychological Society of Great Britain (PSGB), only for it to fold in 1879 with the death of Cox. Why did the BPS succeed while its predecessor failed?

Richards argues that, among other factors, what militated against the success of the PSGB was lack of agreement over what constituted the discipline of psychology and the backgrounds of its founders, who were mainly lawyers. Among the founders of the BPS, Sully, McDougall, Rivers, Boyce-Gibson and Smith all lectured in psychology and had

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connections with London colleges: the first three with UCL, Boyce-Gibson with Westfield College and Smith with King's College.

Another factor that helped the survival of the BPS was its ability to evolve. The BPS adopted its current name to distinguish it from an 'unacademic group' that was using its former title (Edgell, 1947/2001). The founders of the Society had wanted it only to contain members who 'are recognised teachers in some branch of psychology or who have published work of recognisable value' (Lovie, 2001, p.97). These rather restrictive criteria meant that even at the end of 1918 membership was only 98. By then there was the danger of possible rival organisations being formed to deal with medical and industrial aspects of psychology. In addition, the increase in costs of producing the *British Journal of Psychology* (subscriptions for which were then included in membership fees, rising from half a guinea to a guinea in 1914) meant that there were financial difficulties that could only be solved by an increase in the number of members.

In 1919 Myers suggested that membership be opened to 'all those interested in various branches of psychology' (Edgell, 1947/2001, p.11, italics in the original). The acceptance of

this idea meant that by the end of 1919 membership had increased to 427.

The increased membership began to ask the Society to cater for their specialisms, with 1919 also seeing the formation of a Medical Section and Charles Myers outlining his vision for a new Industrial Psychology Section. He commented: '...it is hoped in the near future to form further Sections for social psychology, the psychology of aesthetics, animal psychology, etc.' The Aesthetics Section was formed three years later, lasting just 15 years, with the Social Psychology Section not following until 1940.

The *Quarterly Bulletin of The British Psychological Society*, a predecessor of *The Psychologist*, was launched in 1948. It quickly became a forum for discussion and controversy: in a letter in 1949, Hans Eysenck criticised the BPS for electing officers undemocratically, for being 'remote from the ordinary membership' and not having a dedicated social psychology journal. The *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* was launched in 1962, with Michael Argyle and Jack Tizard as editors.

And so the evolution continued: the Royal Charter was granted in 1965, and since then membership has risen to over 5000 in 1970, 9000 in 1980, 16,000 in 1990, and then more than doubling to over 34,000 in 2000. Given this ability to evolve, it seems apt that co-founder James Sully is credited with being one of the main people who brought the notion of evolution to psychology. We have to hope that the BPS continues to evolve in a successful way.

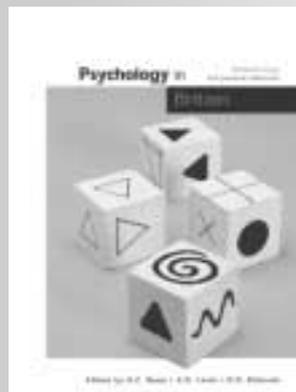
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HISTORY ON THE WEB

For more on the history of psychology in Britain and the BPS, see Geoff Bunn's chronology at www.bps.org.uk/centenary/chronology.cfm. Here you will find a list of brief descriptions of notable events from 1853 to 1987.



HISTORY IN PRINT

Produced to mark the centenary of the Society, *Psychology in Britain: Historical Essays and Personal Reflections* edited by Geoff Bunn, Sandy Lovie and Graham Richards was published this year by BPS Books in association with the Science Museum (ISBN 1 85433 332 1). The book, a collection of essays by pre-eminent historians of psychology and distinguished senior psychologists, is the first major study of the history of psychology in Britain for over 30 years.

Psychology in Britain: Historical Essays and Personal Reflections is available from the BPS Leicester office (price BPS members £18.86, non-members £26.95, plus £2.00 p&p).