

The British Psychological Society: Problems and Prospects*

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ON October 24th the Society will be fifty-three years old, and, as everyone knows, in these early years of its second half-century it has been undergoing considerable self-criticism and consequent reform. As these processes have been much in evidence during the past year, it has been thought appropriate, and indeed advisable, that on this occasion the Presidential Address, while being in no way an official expression of the Council's views, should seek to set before the general body of members some of the main problems that confront the Society and some of the retiring President's thoughts about them.

There is another consideration that makes it desirable to take stock at the present time. In the light of the recent article by Professor Cohen and others (Cohen, Hansel and May, 1954) on "Natural History of Learned and Scientific Societies", it looks as though our Society has certainly reached the third, and may have entered the fourth, of the five 'epidemiological' phases that these authors' examination of 220 scientific societies has led them to distinguish. The *first* phase is "a latent period in which the idea of a society is germinating in the minds of one or more individuals", and our Society had passed through that phase in 1901, when Sully and the nine other founders met in University College London and brought the Society into being. The *second* phase is that in which there is an "increasingly rapid growth of members"; and, if we treat as exceptional the remarkable increase in membership in 1919, it is possible to argue that our second phase lasted until fairly recently, because, as the Honorary General Secretary's Report shows, in the eight years that ended in 1948 the number of members more than doubled, rising from 811 to 1,663. In the last five years, however, we have grown less rapidly. In the period 1949 to 1952 the average annual increase was only 7 per [2]cent; last year it was less than 1 per cent; and among members in the United Kingdom there was actually a decrease. This means that we have reached Professor Cohen and his co-authors' *third* phase, in which "the rate of growth is no longer increasing but remains fairly constant or even decreases"; and perhaps we are in danger of entering their *fourth* phase, in which "competing societies and shifts of scientific interest" produce "immunity to the Society's ideas in non-members and members alike"—an immunity that leads to the *fifth* phase, in which "the rate of attracting new members no longer offsets wastage from various causes" and the society "may disappear or recommence a new cycle of activity". Our Society may, therefore, be at a critical stage of its development, and this is a second reason why some of its more important problems should be examined.

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Finance

One important problem, which affects all the others, is that of finance. The Society's present financial position has three markedly unsatisfactory features. First, although we paid our way last year (in welcome contrast to 1951 and 1952), the excess of income over expenditure was only £151, which is a paltry sum and smaller than the surplus in 1950, when there was £2,400 less income from subscriptions. Secondly, our assets are inadequate, as we have not yet replaced any part of the £2,500 that we had to withdraw from investment and turn into cash in 1951. Thirdly, we are working within the restrictive limits of too small a budget, which last year provided for expenditure of only £7,254 as compared with expenditure of \$420,000 by the American Psychological Association, whose members are no more than six times as numerous as ours.

It seems to me that we should set ourselves two financial aims: to spend more on valuable existing services, and at the same time to build up funds for initiating desirable new ventures. In other words, we ought to have a budget that will enable us both to carry on our present activities with more elbow-room and to set aside each year a sum that will be available when we want to start some new activity, such as compiling and maintaining a register, petitioning for a charter, providing professional advice and protection for our members, publishing an employment bulletin, or carrying out a public information programme.

To achieve these aims, we must, of course, eliminate all extravagant expenditure. We cannot afford, for example, to have unnecessary meetings of the Council or of Committees—especially those that have many members from the right side of the Tweed. Similarly, we must ensure that our journals, while remaining creditable to the Society in form as well as content, are produced as economically as possible. By themselves, however, economies will not give us what we need. They are necessary but not sufficient, and I am afraid we shall have to face and accept an increase in subscriptions.

When the Society was founded, the annual subscription was half-a-guinea, and in 1905, as Professor Edgell (1947) recorded in her history of [3]the Society's first forty years, surplus funds led to a proposal to reduce it to five shillings—a proposal that was abandoned in favour of spending the surplus on journals for the use of members. In 1914 the subscription was raised to a guinea, to include a subscription to *The British Journal of Psychology* which had been founded independently by Ward and Rivers in 1904, and had been taken over by the Society in 1914, with Dr. C. S. Myers as editor, after protracted and difficult negotiations. When the Society was reorganized in 1919, the basic subscription was still a guinea, but there was an additional fee for each of the special sections which were then created. During the thirty-five years that have since elapsed, the basis of the subscription has been changed more than once, and, as we all know to our cost, its amount has been repeatedly increased.

Naturally, it would be gratifying to everyone if the present level of subscription could be left unchanged, but, for myself, I cannot escape the conclusion that, even if different rates of subscription for different classes of members are introduced, it will be necessary not only for Fellows and Associates, but also for everyone else, to pay more both for membership of the Society and for *The British Journal of Psychology*

and *The British Journal of Medical Psychology*. Suppose, for example (and it is only a hypothetical example with no sort of official authority), that the 1,787 members in the United Kingdom were to contribute, on the average, £2 a year more than they do at present. The Society's annual income would thus be increased by £3,500, and with this extra income it would be able to do much more for its members—so much more, I should hope, that the new rate of subscription would be regarded as a better bargain than the old.

If there is an increase in the subscription (and, of course, there can be no increase without the approval of the Society at a general meeting), some members will doubtless wish to write to the Honorary General Secretary to protest. They may, therefore, like to know (if they do not know already) that the American Psychological Association recently raised its dues, and that some of the letters sent to the Central Office could serve as models. Dr. Fillmore H. Sanford (1953) has given these extracts:

Gentlemen:

I hope you will convey to the Board of Directors my protest of the recent increase in dues. I have heard that people around Washington refer to that fancy new building as the APIary; I'd like to suggest that a more appropriate name is the Rookery.

Dear Sir:

Enclosed is my check for \$17.50 and here is my violent protest at paying so much. If I did not need to be an APA member in order to keep my job, I'd resign in a minute.

Gentlemen:

I would feel much better about paying \$17.50 to APA if I felt that anybody in the organization were concerning himself about the welfare of those of us who are on the forefront of applied psychology, working eighteen hours a day to advance psychology where it counts. I don't have time to read your unintelligible journals or to attend meetings to hear pseudo scientists talk over each other's heads.

[4] **Categories of members**

A second problem is that of the composition of the Society. As Professor Wolters reported to the Annual General Meeting, the Articles and By Laws Committee, as at present advised, recommends that a distinction should be drawn between those members who possess, and those who lack, a qualification in psychology.

When the Society was founded, its aim was "to advance scientific psychological research and to further the co-operation of investigators in the different branches of psychology", and membership was limited to those who "were recognized teachers in some branch of psychology or had published work of recognized value". In 1906, however, the Committee discussed a proposal that a wider society, with more popular interests, should be established, the existing society continuing as a research branch of the extended society; and, although this proposal was abandoned, the Society decided at the annual general meeting in 1907 that each member should be allowed to introduce three visitors to any of the Society's meetings, in order to encourage "frequent visits from those interested in psychology, who for one reason or another were inadmissible as members of the Society".

In 1919 the Society had difficulty in meeting the cost of *The British Journal of Psychology* and needed more members in order to pay its way. Also, in Professor Edgell's phrase, there was "some probability" that the medical members would found a separate society of their own if their special requirements were not adequately met. Accordingly, the Society took two decisions. First, it abolished the previous restriction of membership to people actually engaged in psychology and opened the Society to anyone interested in any branch of the subject. Secondly, it formed, in addition to a general section to which every full member belonged, three special sections, medical, educational and industrial, each of which had not only full members, but also, for a time, associate members, who paid only the sectional fee, did not belong to the general section, and were not full members of the Society.

These changes led to an immediate increase in the membership from 98 to 427, but some of the older members felt that the larger audiences, with their varying levels of psychological training, had led to a plethora of papers that neglected the fundamental and more technical aspects of the subject. As a result, in 1925 Dr. C. S. Myers proposed the institution of a specially elected group of twenty-three members, to be styled 'Fellows', whose number could be increased by two a year but must never exceed fifty. He suggested that they might have special meetings for the discussion of basic theoretical issues and projected researches. This proposal, however, did not commend itself to the Society, and it was not until Fellows and Associates were introduced in 1941 that there was any differentiation of members according to their qualifications in psychology.

The present recommendation of the Articles and By-Laws Committee is designed to make the best of both worlds. We wish to continue to [5]admit to the Society acceptable people who are interested in our scientific proceedings but lack a psychological qualification. At the same time we also wish (without detriment to the rights of existing members) to restrict control of the Society in future to members who are qualified psychologists, and, in relation to these members, to introduce more exacting requirements for the category of Fellow. It is, therefore, gratifying that at the Annual General Meeting you should have approved of our moving in this direction; and perhaps, when we have made these long-considered changes, we shall also want to revive and carry into effect the other old suggestion that there should sometimes be special meetings of Fellows and Associates, at which technical papers regarding theory and experiment could be presented and discussed in a way that would be inappropriate to a large audience that included people without specialist qualifications in psychology.

The conduct of the Society's affairs

A third problem is that of the direction and conduct of the Society's affairs. The sovereign power, of course, resides in the members, but they must act through an executive body, and the nature of this body is an important matter. Here, too, there have been notable changes during the Society's first half-century. In 1901 there was a Committee of five, of whom two retired each year; and there was then only one Officer, a Treasurer-Secretary. In 1904 the offices of Treasurer and Secretary were separated, and in 1920 the small Committee was replaced by a Council, which consisted of a President, Vice-Presidents, Treasurer, General Secretary, Librarian, Editor of *The British Journal of Psychology*, Sectional Chairmen and Secretaries, and six elected members. With minor modifications—arising mainly from the publication

of new journals and the formation of branches in the United Kingdom and overseas—this pattern was preserved when the Society was formally incorporated in 1941, and it characterizes the present governing body.

It seems clear, however, that changes in the size and character of the Society—its growth from a small, intimate, united family into a large, dispersed and many-sided institution—demand further changes in its organization and methods of control. In the first place, more formality is now necessary in its procedure, and greater tidiness and strictness in its administration. What could once be settled in an unrecorded conversation between close friends must now be decided formally by a Committee and recorded in an official minute; and what could once be done on the principle that “rules are made for fools” must now be carried out in accordance with the letter of the law. Again, there is much to be said for the proposal to increase the proportion of directly elected members of the Council, both by having more of them and by having less *ex officio* members. For example, although the Society’s journals should certainly have someone to represent them on the Council, it is surely unnecessary that all five Editors should be members; nor, I suggest, should a place [6] on the Society’s governing body now be accorded to the Curator of the Collection of Test Materials or the Librarian, as such.

Further, should we not have a few more committees—much smaller and more homogeneous than the whole Council—to watch over the Council’s several vital interests? There should, of course, be *ad hoc* committees, to deal with unusual problems as they arise. But should there not also be more standing committees, to deal, for example, with finance and publications? It is, of course, possible, and even easy, to create too many committees. Was it not a member of the American Psychological Association who said that he considered himself a scientist and added “I do not understand why it is desirable for clinical psychologists to appoint one another to committees and then sit around, at my expense, thinking up new ways to milk the public”? (Sanford, 1953.) And was it not the Executive Secretary of the Association who admitted that “people do get themselves on committees for reasons other than a burning desire to solve the ostensible problems”? (*ibid.*) Nevertheless, although I should be surprised if we needed all the eight standing committees and thirty-one special committees with which the APA is blessed, we do need, I submit, two or three committees to deal with financial matters (estimates, expenditure, balance sheets, trends and dangers) and other important aspects of our work.

Publications

A fourth problem is encountered in our publications. I have already mentioned the need for economy, not in the sense of restricting the development of our journals, but in the sense of seeing that they are printed and published without extravagance; the loss of more than £3,000 in six years on *The British Journal of Statistical Psychology* must not be repeated. I have also suggested that we should have a standing Publications Committee, and, after hearing Professor Drever this morning, you yourselves approved the proposal that this and the other twenty-two recommendations of last year’s *ad hoc* Publications Committee should be carefully considered by the Council.

The recommendations of that Committee cover the principal aspects of the publications problem as it now exists. But may I suggest that, before we reach final

decisions, we should take fully into account the present implications of relevant historical facts? In particular, it seems to me important that, although *The British Journal of Medical Psychology* is certainly a journal of the whole Society, it originated, and has always been published, in close connexion with the Medical Section, which, when it was instituted, brought into the Society many psychiatrists and other medical practitioners who were then thinking of founding a society and journal of their own: a large proportion of the 329 new members who entered the Society in 1919 were members of the Medical Section, interested in psycho-analysis and its derivatives.

Also, the Society should surely not confine itself to journals that are so much in demand that they yield a handsome profit. Provided the loss is [7]one we can afford, we should be willing to continue publication of a highly reputable journal which sometimes incurs a small deficit. Again, the Society should seek to provide journals which will, in Dr. Eysenck's phrase, "reflect and provide an outlet for research done by its members" though here, too, the proviso is important: there must be enough subscribers to each journal to yield a surplus, or at least to limit the deficit to a bearable amount.

The compilation of a register

A fifth problem is one that has exercised the Society for more than twenty years: the compilation and keeping of a register of trained psychologists, which would both protect the interests of professional psychologists and enable the public, particularly potential employers, to be "insured against inefficiency and charlatanism".

In 1930 the Society decided to make and keep a record of every member's degrees, diplomas, academic standing, publications and membership of other learned societies; and, when the Society was incorporated in 1941, one of the main purposes of differentiating between Fellows and Associates, on the one hand, and Ordinary Members, on the other, was to establish a professional register. It is now thought, especially by the Committee of Professional Psychologists, that a more authoritative register has become an urgent necessity; and, as you heard this morning from Professor Smith, the Charter Committee, while realizing that only an Act of Parliament could give a register statutory force, is proposing, with the Council's approval, to set about compiling, if not a statutory register, an up-to-date directory of psychologists which the Society will underwrite.

The Society's fundamental task

Such are some of the specific problems of policy and organization that now confront the Society. There are also others: for example, the establishment of an employment bureau and bulletin, which, if the full co-operation of universities and other potential employers could be secured, would extend and improve the valuable service now rendered by our Appointments Memoranda.

All these specific problems, however, derive their importance from their bearing on the furthering of psychology, which is the Society's permanent and fundamental task. We all realize that the future of psychology in the British Commonwealth, as in other countries, depends on the confidence and support of the public, as shown by its readiness to employ psychologists and to value psychological knowledge and skills in teachers, administrators and other people occupying non-psychological posts. We all

realize, too, that public support depends both on the scientific standing of psychology and on its practical utility and service to the community. Each of these elements is essential. On the one hand, if psychology were not continually nourished and vitalized by basic research, it would soon become a discreditable mixture of disregarded [8]theory and out-of-date techniques. On the other hand, if there were not numerous psychologists engaged in useful, practical work in education, medicine, industry, Government services and elsewhere, university departments of psychology would not have grown as they have done during the last twenty years: they would still consist of two or three people in an attic or a basement, and they would still be finding it difficult to obtain greater grants than those awarded to small university departments concerned with subjects that have no direct vocational value.

To fulfil its function, the Society must further psychology in both these directions. It must provide meetings, publications and other activities that will stimulate and assist those of its members who are engaged in fundamental research and in providing instruction and training in psychology; and it must at the same time sustain, protect and smooth the path of those engaged in educational, clinical, occupational or some other branch of applied psychology. In short, it must, in the words of its Memorandum of Association, promote both “the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology” and “the efficiency and usefulness of its members”.

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