

The future belongs to psychology

If you are giving a Presidential Address at the largest gathering of psychologists ever to be held in Britain, and it is to be published to the 34,000 members of the Society in addition to being a public lecture, then you are surely obliged to ask the question 'What is the most important thing I can say about psychology today?' It is with this obligation in mind that I have chosen my title.

Now, I have a confession to make regarding when I decided on this title for my Presidential Address. It was in the year 1969. I was an undergraduate at Glasgow University under a great Scottish psychologist, Professor Ralph Pickford, and having just joined the BPS I opened my first copy of *The Bulletin*. There I found the Presidential Address, given by another great Scottish psychologist, Boris Semeonoff, whom I had the privilege of interviewing just before his death at age 88 (MacKay, 1999b). This caused me great anxiety, and I asked myself 'I wonder what I'll speak about when I'm President'. (I have to add that becoming President did not then become part of the great scheme of things, and in fact 20 years passed before I became actively involved in the Society's affairs.) To allay my anxiety I went for a long and lonely walk, and by the time I returned I had my title.

The theme of our centenary year is 'Bringing psychology to society'. I believe it is time for psychology to move from the margins to the centre of society's affairs in virtually every field of human endeavour – education, health, industry and commerce, leisure, law and order, international relations, the economy, transport, the environment. There has never been a better time to put psychology at centre stage.



TOMMY MACKAY gave his Presidential Address at April's Centenary Conference in Glasgow.

I believe we are poised for a prosperous future – for a new century of psychology. These words may seem visionary, but I believe it can be accomplished. Nevertheless, it must be said that such a future will not come by itself. Psychology must grasp it, and there are dangers and obstacles in the way.

The first scenario: Psychology in decline

Throughout my presidential year I constantly stressed three themes: fostering a common bond among all psychologists, raising the profile of psychology in society, and promoting the values of equal opportunity and social justice. We cannot afford to lose the opportunity presented by these challenges. If we do, we may face the first of two scenarios I wish to outline: namely, a weak and divided discipline comprising disparate groups with little common bond, having little or no exclusive territory and making an insignificant impact on society.

I see four main dangers facing psychology. The first is that we do not move forward as a united discipline. Our very diversity creates tension. I have previously expressed it as follows:

To identify the common bond within the wide franchise of psychology may almost defy logic. Our membership encompasses within one society the psychoanalyst complete with couch and the behavioural scientist working on aerospace technology. We could readily provide a dozen more polarities equally stark in their diversity. (MacKay, 2000a)

Second, and related to this, psychology has little territory it can claim for its own. Other professions work throughout our entire heartland – doctors, neurologists, speech and language therapists, teachers, educational researchers, management consultants and numerous others. Some may ask 'Is psychology anything at all?' and they may predict that in due course it will lose its territory to medicine, brain science, sociology, philosophy, ergonomics, organisational studies and anthropology.

Third, probably no subject is so racked by controversies of a kind which at times seem to threaten its very being. Take an example that cuts across the work of many of us – counselling and psychotherapy. The following are chapter titles from a current book covering controversies in this area (Feltham, 1999): 'Psychotherapy is effective', 'The ineffectiveness of psychotherapy', 'Counselling and psychotherapy as enabling and empowering', 'Psychotherapy and counselling as unproven and unconvincing'. This applies to many fields of psychology. You can have one psychologist, for example a psychoanalyst, whose professional foundations and life-work will be viewed as having no validity whatsoever by another.

The fourth danger lies in a question frequently asked both by the general public and by other professionals: 'Does psychology do any good?' It was asked fluently in relation to my own main field of educational psychology by Jacobsen (1985), a philosopher of education:

Imagine...you were allowed to formulate only one question about it,

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which would be the most fruitful one? I would ask, Why should we have educational psychology at all? Or... What good does educational psychology do? The more one thinks about this question, the more difficult it is to find an answer.

The second scenario: Psychology at centre stage

There is, however, a quite different scenario. It is a vision of a strong and united profession that has grasped the significance of the almost unlimited scientific contribution it can make as a central academic and professional force in society. This is my vision for psychology, and I believe there are three key reasons why we can grasp it.

First, by any standard, psychology is thriving. Whatever statistics you examine, whether number of pupils taking A-level psychology, or number and range of undergraduate courses, what you will find is the rise and rise of psychology. Take BPS membership itself. When I joined the Society it was under 5000. Today it is over 34,000, and the growth in the last 10 years has been phenomenal.

Second, psychology by its very definition is a central science for society. Essentially it is the systematic study of the mind and behaviour. But the key issues facing the world are issues of human behaviour and relationships, so if this is what we do then by definition we must be at the heart of human affairs. I came to give this address straight from a live radio programme on which I made the challenge 'Tell me the news headlines as the programme starts and I will tell you why psychology is central to everything that arises'.

The centrality of psychology to society is being promoted by a changing paradigm within the discipline. This was reflected in a recent Delphi study in which over 800 members of the Society expressed their views of the future (Haste *et al.*, 2001). The two predictions relating to psychology as a science were that there will be an increased research emphasis on everyday life, quality of life and the whole person, and that research will move increasingly from the laboratory to real-world settings. The more this happens, the more important psychology will be seen to be.

Indeed, far from losing its territory, I believe psychology is now taking it all the time from other disciplines. For example, there was a time when the diagnosis or identification of disordered human



behaviour was very much a medical prerogative, because the behaviours in question have or might have an organic base. This once applied to dyslexia and severe learning difficulties, and still applies, though ever decreasingly, to areas such as autism and ADHD.

I do not want to be misunderstood regarding the new scientific paradigm. It is not a replacement for, but is complementary to, the traditional scientific, laboratory-based model. Research is not obliged to be 'real world'. Also, if we say we should not study human behaviour just for the simple joy of studying it, we would place psychology in a position of unique disadvantage among all the subjects in the world. I uphold pure psychological science, and I view pure and applied psychology as one seamless, indivisible whole. It is this indivisible discipline that I wish to see at the heart of human affairs.

The title of this address, which I have attributed to Maslow, provides the third reason for my optimism regarding psychology's future. Maslow's own work indicates clearly why the importance of psychology must increase.

At an earlier stage in society the focus of human endeavour was more at the bottom of his 'hierarchy of needs' – the struggle to meet the basic physiological requirements of life in relation to satisfying hunger and thirst, and other needs such as security. In developed societies such as our own the focus is now much higher up the triangle, at the levels of love, esteem and self-actualisation. It is there that the systematic study of the mind and behaviour is of crucial significance.

This can be demonstrated by

considering the origins of applied psychology in Britain in the main settings of health, education, work and the law. Psychologists were employed in these fields to deal respectively with disorders and disabilities, special educational needs, meeting the demands of war and the aftermath of crime – that is, to respond to the problem areas of life. All of this will continue to be needed, but the almost unlimited scope for psychology in these four fields is a much wider and more positive one – promoting health and quality of life, fostering learning and raising achievement, enhancing work satisfaction and motivation and fostering harmonious communities.

I would now like to illustrate my vision for the future of psychology by reference to four key areas of my own work.

Socio-economic disadvantage

This first area takes us into the question of values. Science is not value free. Its priorities, its agenda, its analysis, its proposals operate in a context of values. I am going to argue that for psychology these values should be explicit, and to illustrate this with reference to socio-economic disadvantage.

The impact of socio-economic disadvantage is experienced literally from the cradle to the grave. It is associated with significantly higher infant mortality rates and significantly lower longevity. The entire span of life in between is marked by poorer health on virtually every measurable indicator and by a higher incidence of physical and mental disabilities (MacKay, 1995).

My native city of Glasgow has been

described in recent newspaper headlines as 'the city where citizens have shortest lives'. There is a difference of a full seven years in average male longevity between Glasgow and the wealthier adjoining area of East Renfrewshire. The district of Maryhill where I was born and bred has the second worst record in Scotland for health and the lowest for educational achievement.

Psychologists are almost uniquely placed to deal with the study of equal opportunities and social justice, not as political campaigners but as scientists. I have sought to do this through analysis of the structure of social justice in relation to government spending, poverty and the council tax, the language of education, discrimination in public services and the distribution of public resources (MacKay, 1982, 1983, 1999a, 2000c, 2000e, 2001a, 2001c).

Is it possible to have agreed values in psychology? I believe that it is, and I would propose the endorsement of the simple value framework outlined by Prilleltensky and Nelson (1997) – health, caring and compassion, self-determination and participation, human diversity and social justice. I recognise that no system of values is without its tensions. Ironically, the value of human diversity is itself a potential contradiction. Psychologists, like other members of society, demonstrate this diversity by representing the full spectrum of philosophical, political, cultural and religious positions, and their attempt to define priorities for psychological and social interventions will itself be driven by differing interpretations of values (MacKay, 2000d).

Nevertheless, I believe that we have a common foundation, and it has perhaps

Do those that plan the future of transport automatically seek the opinion of psychologists?

never been better expressed than by Brill (1962):

We believe that every single human being is of equal and infinite value... This remains true however strange, unpleasant, or socially unacceptable that human being may be. It is true of helpless babyhood, lunacy and senility... it is true of the grossly subnormal as of the highly intelligent; it is as true of the... tramp as of the managing director.

Transport

Exactly 10 years ago I outlined passenger transport policy as a potential major growth area for psychology (MacKay, 1991a, 1991b). I used a small but key sample for my study – the chief executives of the seven Passenger Transport Executives in Britain and of the 10 largest regional transport networks. They completed a questionnaire on seven key policy areas:

the mobility limited, transport and socio-economic disadvantage, environmental and social impact of transport systems, modifying ridership patterns, analysis of travel demand, internal vehicle design and human factors affecting safety.

The result was that they overwhelmingly viewed psychology as 'relevant' or 'very relevant' to these areas. What has happened since then? A colleague working in this area recently described it to me as being a 'green field site'. I recognise that a lot of work has been done in relation to transport psychology. But we have to ask: When the politicians and the planners are making their proposals for the future of transport, do they automatically turn to the psychologists?

Raising achievement

For the last four years I have been working with West Dumbartonshire Council on what I have found to be the most exciting research project ever. It is a bold vision to

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transform the literacy levels of a whole population from young to old in Scotland's second poorest area. From our main sample of children age four to seven years we have now analysed the results of about 20,000 individual assessments. Year by year we have seen their standards rising significantly in all the key areas of early reading skills, together with dramatic increases in reading ability in our secondary age sample (MacKay, 2000b, 2001b; MacKay & McDonald, 2001).

This has led to many local and national newspaper headlines celebrating the results of research-based, psychological interventions of this kind – 'Pupils reading skills getting so much better all the time', 'Council's literacy scheme is a world leader', 'A decade and we can end illiteracy'. Our stated aims are not only high but visionary. We are committed to achieving higher self-esteem among pupils, lower disruption in schools, better school ethos, better staff morale, economic savings, lower crime rates, a more skilled workforce and a stronger economy. Should psychology seek for anything less than this in terms of its potential impact on society?

Declaring the future

Last year I was asked by East Renfrewshire Council to design and carry out a research study that would be unique in the world. What I told the staff of the six experimental schools at our first meeting was this. We want to do something that's never been done before: to raise children's reading levels by doing nothing different from what we are already doing – except getting them to declare that they will do it. My 'declaration theory' no doubt seemed unusual, but I was building on a vast reservoir of psychological research in areas such as self-esteem, beliefs and attributions, self-efficacy and interactive learning.

On a minimum of three occasions each day the 565 experimental children made bold declarations of their future levels of reading achievement. At the end of the intervention, the experimentals (age four to six years) had made significantly more progress than the controls in knowledge of letter sounds, letter names and word reading. Perhaps more importantly, the experimentals had shown a significant positive shift during the intervention in their attitudes and beliefs about reading

and their own future achievement (MacKay, 2001a). Qualitative data showed that they enjoyed reading and homework more, and became more aware of the reading process. Declarations had begun to change behaviour and goals. The national newspaper headlines appearing during the Annual Conference included 'Pupils chant mantra of success' and 'Pupils have skills to shout about'.

It is time for psychology itself to start making some bold declarations about the future. Psychology has settled for too little too often. I believe that at this stage in the history of our discipline we face a crucial choice. We can either, in the words of Kurt Lewin (1952), become a 'superhighway leading nowhere', or we can claim a future that belongs to psychology.

It is time for psychology to rise up and assert itself in its central role in all human affairs and progress. I believe psychology has a key part to play in getting crime out of our cities, litter off our streets, illiteracy out of our schools and inequity out of our society. It is time to stand up and, as a great discipline, make a bold declaration: *The future belongs to psychology.*