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Teaching conceptual issues through historical understanding

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that the topic area of Conceptual and Historical Issues in Psychology is a well-crafted one, in that historical analysis is an invaluable tool in teaching the conceptual issues that must be appreciated to gain a full understanding of psychology. Using selected teaching examples we discuss how the history of psychology can illuminate and inform an understanding of not only specific issues and debates in psychology, but also the nature of psychology as a reflexive, socially embedded discipline. We then go on to present a case study of a recent curriculum re-design at the University of Gloucestershire that put Conceptual and Historical Issues at the core of first-year teaching, with the intention that the insights gained will provide a firm foundation for understanding the remainder of the syllabus. Early indications are that introducing students to this perspective while they are new to university study encourages them to see it as a form of thinking differently that is inherent to Higher, versus Further, Education; whereas previous practice of covering it in a final-year capstone module resulted in some students treating it as a marginal topic.

Paper

It has been some years now since the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2002) released subject benchmarks for psychology, and the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2007) updated its Qualifying Examinations syllabus, in both cases including a requirement for explicit consideration of 'Conceptual and Historical Issues in Psychology' (CHIP). However, in both cases the coverage of CHIP was given a different status to the other syllabus areas of Biological Psychology, Cognitive Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Individual Differences, and Social Psychology, in that CHIP did not need to be separately delivered and assessed. This difference in status, and some lack of clarity over what CHIP entails, has led to some resistance to comprehensive coverage of CHIP in university curriculums, it being covered instead as an adjunct to topically organised coverage. Here we argue that conceptual issues are of fundamental importance in understanding the nature of psychology; and further that history provides a productive and effective means of teaching conceptual issues. Thus CHIP does not consist of some history, plus some coverage of issues, but rather is a coherent topic in its own right wherein historical understudying illuminates conceptual issues. In this paper we will consider the importance of understanding conceptual issues, and argue for the use of history in teaching them. We will concentrate on broad curriculum design, and conclude with a case study of a recent curriculum change at the University of Gloucestershire that emphasises thorough coverage of CHIP as foundational to the degree.

We start our discussion by considering the meaning of 'conceptual issues'. There are a number of ongoing issues and debates in psychology which are commonly identified. For example, Bem and De Jong (2013) and Gross (2009) variously include consciousness, free will/determinism, abnormality, idiographic versus nomothetic, and heredity and environment, amongst others. These are clearly foundational issues that students should engage with, helping them to evaluate theories and to appreciate the diversity of the discipline. Such debates are often included as relevant within topical coverage, for example, idiographic and nomothetic approaches as part of a unit on personality, and mind/brain as part of a unit on neuropsychology. Here history can provide examples, add interest, and show how debates change over time. However, such discrete coverage encourages a view that these debates can be considered in isolation and are resolved for a given discipline area; and discourages a view of these as interrelated and ongoing concerns for a discipline embedded in particular social and historical contexts.

The QAA benchmark statement simply states that 'it is expected that students will gain knowledge of conceptual and historical perspectives in psychology'. The most recent BPS curriculum guidance, gives some examples of topics to be considered within CHIP:

> [T]he study of psychology as a science; the social and cultural construction of psychology; conceptual and historical paradigms and models - comparisons and critiques; political and ethical issues in psychology; integration across multiple perspectives.

Much of this can be achieved through discrete coverage, but integration across perspectives, and consideration of the social construction of psychology, is more difficult. The original syllabus guidance provided by the BPS gives a fuller specification:

> The syllabus is structured around a number of key questions: What is science, and to what extent does psychology (the science of the mind) exemplify scientific characteristics? To what extent is psychology socially and culturally constructed? Can psychology be politically neutral? Can psychology be morally neutral?
>
> Methods of acquiring knowledge: scientific method versus common sense; the relationship between facts and values. Critiques of traditional methods in psychology; the significance of the standpoint from which values are understood.
>
> Paradigms and research programmes: Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend. Lessons from the history of psychology: Reductionism, structuralism, functionalism, relativism and the nature of consciousness.
>
> Critical psychology and subjectivity: The critical psychological view of subject and subjectivity. The origins of ethical issues for psychology; moral underpinnings of the theory, research and practice of psychology; psychologists and community members as partners in the construction of ethically responsible practices.

This fuller statement of the CHIP syllabus invites a more contextual analysis and understanding, situating individual issues and debates in psychology in a wider framework. Historical awareness is foundational to this, allowing an analysis of the ways in which developments in psychology and stances towards debates have been shaped by social, economic and political factors (Tyson, Jones & Elcock, 2011). In this sense history can be seen as a tool for metatheory: theorising about psychology's theories, and the adequacy of theory, method and practice (Jones & Elcock, 2001). For example, Jones and Elcock (2001) contrast the development of psychology in the US and Germany at the start of the 20th century, claiming that different societies produce different forms of psychology due to different responses to the societies' purposes and assumptions about human nature. Historical analysis here is used to show the ways in which psychology is embedded in, and shaped by, particular socio-historical contexts. The wider lesson is that similar factors operate in contemporary psychology, offering an understanding of the ways in which psychology is 'socially and culturally constructed'. This is an example of history providing the benefit of hindsight in highlighting sometimes hidden aspects of psychology, reflecting Harris' (2009, p.34) claim that 'through historical awareness, it will be easier to critically view what is taking place today'.

Teaching example: Political and moral neutrality

The BPS syllabus suggests that students should consider whether psychology can be politically and morally neutral. A powerful example that can be used to illustrate such issues is the role of psychologists in both supporting and challenging segregation in schooling in the US in the period following the Second World War, culminating in the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling that segregated education was unconstitutional. Arguments in favour of segregation from 'scientific racists' can be contrasted with arguments made against segregation, particularly by Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, who demonstrated that segregation was psychologically damaging to Black children. The Clarks' work can be used as a case study to inspire discussion, for example, asking students to consider notions of engaged scholarship, and the role of psychology as an agent of social change (Rutherford, 2013).

History used in this metatheoretical way can be seen as supporting critical thinking. Critical thinking is seen as a key skill in psychology education, and one that is particularly engendered in the research methods training that is the *sine qua non* of any psychology degree. Critical thinking is often characterised as rational, evidence-based reasoning that avoids a range of logical fallacies, and this is indeed an important skill that should be applied to psychological claims. However, thinking critically about psychology should go beyond the narrow confines of rational evaluation to adopt a broader perspective considering the contexts in which work takes place: a distinction between 'critical thinking in psychology' and 'critical thinking about psychology' (Kirschner, 2011). For example, given statistical evidence of racial differences in IQ in North American males, students may think critically around such issues as correlation versus causation, the validity of IQ tests, and stereotype threat: this would be critical thinking in psychology. However, going

further to consider the aims of the researchers, sources of funding, and the context of the US educational system would be critical thinking about psychology. A focus on critical thinking in the narrow sense encourages a view of psychology as a tightly formed discipline with clear boundaries, whereas critical thinking in the broader, contextual sense encourages a realisation that psychology's boundaries are indistinct and permeable. Thus students should be encouraged to apply critical thought not only to individual theories or knowledge claims, but to the conceptual issues and debates that persist in the discipline, including an understanding of why these claims persist. This helps students to develop a more thorough and accurate understanding of psychology, and hence a richer appreciation of it.

Teaching example: Heredity and environment

The debate about the relative influences of heredity and environment on character and behaviour is a well worn one, and extensively covered in the literature on issues in psychology. However, coverage is typically of the 'critical thinking in psychology' form, considering the terms of the debate, the evidence for or against both sides, and the emergence of interactionist theories in identifying the 'correct' position. In the better examples the debate is discussed in terms of its historical trajectory, showing how positions have changed over time (e.g. Fairholm 2012). It is rare to find the debate covered in the form of 'critical thinking about psychology', for example, considering the ways in which claims are adopted and presented to the extent that they support an author's political position. This represents a missed opportunity to encourage students to look past the science to identify the purpose of psychological arguments. In one of our classes we ask students to read Taylor's (1992) article 'Race and Intelligence: the Evidence' wherein he asserts that science proves that Black people are genetically determined to be less intelligence than White people, that he is doing proper science, and than anyone who disagrees with him is driven by political dogma. We then ask students to discuss the article, with an emphasis on evaluating how Taylor uses evidence to advance a particular argument. This exercise invites a wider discussion about psychology and politics, bias in psychology, and the extent to which the scientific method can ensure objectivity.

There are a number of reasons to study history, beyond inherent interest. History can help us to understand where psychology has come from and how it has changed. It can help us to learn from and address the mistakes of the past. It can also, as we argue here, inform contextual critical analysis (Jones & Elcock, 2001). However, to achieve these purposes history needs to be seen as more than just one darned thing after another, but rather as an act of analysis in and of itself. Introductory texts tend to present a naive view of history, providing a chronology of names and dates that charts the progressive improvement of psychological theory and practice to the present day's fundamentally correct position. However, this 'old style' history is rejected in modern historiographical scholarship in favour of a 'new style' (Furumoto, 1989). This new style differs from the old on four dimensions (Van Drunen & Jansz, 2004). Firstly new style histories are historicist rather than presentist, in that they interpret historical work in the context of its time, rather

than from a present day perspective. Secondly, they are contextualist rather than internalist, in seeing development as resulting from the interrelation of many factors. Thirdly, they are naturalistic rather than personalistic, in recognising that an individual's work is influenced by the context in which they act. And finally, they are constructivist rather than realist, in seeing theories as accepted but not necessarily true (Tyson, Jones & Elcock, 2011). In this new style of history the emphasis is on analysing how theories are arrived at and why they are accepted, and as such constitute conceptual analysis in and of themselves (Rutherford, 2013). History can provide examples for discussion and stimulate student engagement, but also demonstrate changes in psychology's engagement with issues over time, and demonstrate the relationships that obtain between psychology and society, culture, economics and politics. This facilitates an examination of the assumptions that lie hidden behind theory, method and practice (Slife & Williams, 1995).

Teaching example: Constituencies in psychology

Richards (1997) introduces the notion of constituencies in psychology: that members of the discipline represent, in their theories and practices, the interests of people like themselves. This can be seen in Richards' historical analysis of psychology's engagement with race, or in the use of social Darwinism as a theoretical justification for inequality by those who benefit from the status quo in society. Brock (2011) suggests that changing constituencies in psychology's history lead to changing psychology: that as more women or more members of ethnic minorities enter the discipline, so the theories produced within the discipline change to better represent those groups. We discuss this with students in terms of sexuality. Following the decriminalisation of homosexuality within society it becomes possible to more openly represent the interests of the LGBT community, leading to changed theories of sexuality. The coverage of homosexuality in the *DSM* can be used to illustrate notions of power and the use of psychology for social control.

A thorough, contextual understanding of psychology's history can demonstrate to students that psychology is embedded in a social context; is constructed from underlying, usually taken for granted, assumptions; is influenced by ethical values and political purposes; and pursuant of an implicit moral agenda (Richards, 1995). In this view theory and practice in psychology are not value neutral, but rather are fundamentally intertwined with morals and values (Morawski, 2001).

Teaching example: Ethics in psychology

All students are taught the importance of research ethics in psychology, and professional ethics are a key part of applied trainings. This is one area where historical examples are routinely used, to highlight the bad old days of Milgram and Zimbardo. However, ethical values in psychology continue to evolve, and their maintenance is often an ongoing challenge. Tyson et al. (2011) trace the development of ethical standards in psychology, showing how this development reflects changing social contexts but also how these standards are threatened by attempts of state agents to make use of psychology for their own purposes. We ask

students to discuss the critical role of psychologists in torture programmes at the Guantanamo Bay detention centre and elsewhere (The Constitution Project, 2013), and use this discussion to reflect on the nature and importance of ethics, moral dilemmas in psychological practice, and the relationship between psychology and the state. A considerably fuller example of teaching ethics within a psychology course can be found in Akhurst and Elwell (2014) in this issue.

Although, as discussed above, issues within CHIP may be considered as a part of units in other topics in psychology, we feel that this misses the opportunity to provide a 'big picture' understanding of psychology as a distinctively reflexive human science (Tyson et al., 2011). We have long believed that coverage of CHIP in dedicated units has distinct advantages. CHIP can enrich students' understanding of conceptual issues and so help them to think more critically about psychology, challenging the assumptions that underpin the discipline and evaluating alternatives to mainstream psychology. This view is reflected in a number of degree courses that include such integrated coverage. Below, we provide a case study of the curriculum in psychology at the University of Gloucestershire as one example of the use of CHIP to provide a foundation of critical thinking about psychology that students can then bring to bear in their learning throughout the degree.

Case study: Teaching CHIP at the University of Gloucestershire

Undergraduate psychology teaching began at the University of Gloucestershire in October 1993; the degree had been designed to closely match the then extant BPS syllabus for qualifying examinations and was validated under the Council for National Academic Awards. Initially the course had a module that investigated conceptual issues in psychology but without any consideration of historical issues. Later Jones and Elcock developed a module that did combine historical and conceptual issues, that module, History and Theories in Psychology, ran until 2014.

While there were some incremental changes to the exact coverage on History and Theories the core concept of using historical examples to help create a vocabulary of understanding in order to better tackle contemporary conceptual issues was established when the module was originally designed.

Impetus for change

There were multiple pressures for change to the Psychology curriculum. Following changes to funding arrangements from 2012, with the central government grant being replaced entirely by tuition fees, many Psychology courses effectively had lower income per student than under the old funding arrangements. The precise details vary by institution, depending on fees charged, and the amount of income received that did not depend on undergraduate students. At the University of Gloucestershire, being a primarily teaching institution, there was an anticipation that this may be a challenging issue. That led to the management of the university calling for a re-design of all undergraduate courses, with two aims. One was to cut

the number of optional modules leading to some efficiency savings, the other was to use these savings in order to increase the amount of contact time students experienced during their degrees, increasing perceived value for money. Many courses within the University made minimal changes to their programmes, but the Psychology team saw this as an opportunity to thoroughly refresh the curriculum.

This led to a number of opportunities so that CHIP could be more thoroughly integrated with introductory material in year one. The research methods core could be reimagined so that it would be embedded alongside an expanded version of critical thinking. Finally the conceptual issues teaching would happen over the whole year, with a second semester module focussing on everyday psychology, with a core of social psychology along with conceptual issues. With no optional modules in the first year all the single honours students would experience the same teaching material. Finally students would have more contact time with staff, and a seminar programme with a mixture of activities was developed to support the various lectures across the modules. In the newly developed curriculum two modules are taught in the first semester, making up the whole of the first semester's teaching. One is Foundations of Psychology, which introduces academic skills, critical thinking and research design. The other is Conceptual Issues in Psychology, which introduces conceptual and historical issues while giving an introduction to the discipline.

Integrating critical thinking and research methods

Following the Dearing Report (1997) it was recommended that institutions of higher education should encourage students to produce a personal development plan to help them reflect upon their learning. This may be seen as the part of the general commodification of higher education and like neo-liberalism more generally has both negative and positive impacts (Papadopoulos, 2003). In 2001 the QAA announced the policy for Personal Development Planning, giving Universities and other providers of Higher Education five years to prepare before introduction for the academic year 2005–2006.

In response to this the University of Gloucestershire implemented personal development planning across its courses. The university had always had a policy of making sure that students recognised their strengths and weaknesses across a set of core academic skills and the focus on Personal Development Planning was an extension of that programme.

The curriculum changes following the changes to fees led to the university calling on individual courses to embed this material into their level four teaching. We took the opportunity to create a module that integrated core academic skills, critical thinking and research design. By designing the module in this way students are invited to think of themselves as pivotal in psychology research. The module also allows the opportunity to make connections between reflexivity in research design, thus encouraging the students to reflect more generally about their academic strengths and weaknesses.

Broad versus narrow critical thinking

Halpern (1998) has argued that while psychology degrees, because of the emphasis on research methods and science, should lead to graduates with strong critical thinking skills they may not. One possible reason for this is the lack of transfer of skills and knowledge from research methods courses to both other courses and everyday life. Drawing on the work of Hummel and Holyoak (1997) Halpern goes on to suggest that one of the major reasons for this is a lack of explicit structure mapping, and that by making structural aspects of problems salient these may later act as retrieval cues when people encounter similar problems in another domain.

Halpern (1998) goes on to elaborate a possible model of teaching critical thinking to psychology undergraduates that includes four stages: a dispositional or attitudinal component; teaching specific critical thinking skills; activities to enhance structural aspects of problems; and some emphasis on meta-cognitive skills to help direct learning. This model formed the basis of critical thinking teaching before the 2012 intake to the psychology degree and it formed a good fit with the core academic skills teaching and learning that was also done in previous years.

In the new degree scheme one possible tension created by the Halpern model of critical thinking was identified. It is a narrow model of critical thinking – the application of some aspects of the scientific method to problems outside of psychology. So in teaching critical thinking as only being about the application of a set of methods to do with empirical evidence to everyday life we may reinforce the notion that only through the use of science can we understand human activity.

Yancher, Silfe and Warne (2008) comment on the growth of critical thinking across the range of psychology, they note however that this tends to be within the confines of narrow critical thinking, where the assumptions underlying scientific psychology go unchallenged. They argue for an expanded notion of critical thinking including the use of critique from social constructionism (Gergen, 1994), critical psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997), critical history (Danziger, 1990) and feminist psychology (Morawski, 1994).

Kirschner (2011) examines various critical challenges to the orthodoxy of methodological critical thinking, and identifies four distinctive types of critical thinking about psychology: experiential, relational, emancipatory-activist, or emancipatory- ironic. One challenge is, however, that these distinctive sensibilities do not necessarily mesh together, and differ at the levels of epistemology and ontology. The challenge for us was how to bring some of these sensitivities into our level four teaching without overwhelming the students.

The solution we chose to this is to run the research methods and critical thinking module in parallel with an integrated conceptual and historical issues module. With the teaching teams having some crossover it is possible for the two modules to

mutually support each other. There is also the possibility that by introducing the notion of crossing over skills and knowledge from one module to another early in the degree course that the students will get into that habit early. Another part of the solution involved increased class contact time. So on each of the two semester one modules students have four hours of lectures, and two one-hour seminars. Thus issues raised in the lecture series can be discussed, or where appropriate activity-based learning can be used to reinforce the teaching and learning experience of the lecture series. In addition we fully utilise an electronic learning environment on both modules, and use a variety of further reading, web-based activities, and links to video and music to help put the learning into a wider context.

For the module, 'Foundations of Psychology', which introduces academic skills, critical thinking and research design, the curriculum has been designed so that after some introductory materials about philosophy of science, the students concentrate on academic skills, before being introduced to critical thinking as a further academic skill. Then after learning about the use of evidence in everyday decision making, and the basics of argument mapping and understanding how argumentative fallacies work, the research design training begins. In research design there is teaching about both quantitative and qualitative designs so that the impression is given that both have value for modern psychology.

Students are introduced to epistemological and ontological notions that help to inform the current diversity in methods within psychology. At this stage students are encouraged to recognise that different commitments to ontology may lead to different preferred methods being adopted. However, some care is taken to introduce these as open questions that have not yet been resolved so as not to undercut alternative ways of doing psychology.

Teaching historical and conceptual issues.

We have already outlined our beliefs about why it is advantageous to teach historical and conceptual issues early in the degree. The module begins by considering the historical emergence of psychology in the nineteenth century and its development as an independent discipline. In doing so it highlights the ways in which social context influences the nature of psychology. Having established a model of psychology as a reflexive discipline embedded in particular socio-historical contexts, it goes on to analyse current issues and debates in contemporary psychology.

Evaluation

This new scheme is now entering its third year of operation with the September 2014 entrants. Two cohorts have gone through the new level four. To some extent the final evaluation will happen when those students move into level six, and graduate. There is, however, the opportunity to examine module evaluations for the first-year modules, and compare them with those students who took the original

'History and Theories of Psychology' module most recently. The authors co-teach the level six module, and alongside two other colleagues (one on each module) between them teach two-thirds of the level four modules.

History and Theories of Psychology module evaluation Modules are evaluated using a tool on Moodle that allows for anonymous comments, and includes a short set of closed questions common across the university. All evaluation information comes from the academic year 2013–2014. While the majority of students rated the module well about 25 per cent rated it very poorly, indicating that it had not met its learning outcomes, again the majority of written comments on the module were positive, but two students commented that they found it boring. In talking to the student representatives they felt a group of students never fully engaged with the teaching and learning opportunities.

Conceptual Issues in Psychology module evaluation On this module replies were overwhelming positive. In response to the closed question 'Participating in this module has stimulated my interest in the subject' all students agreed, with 71 per cent agreeing strongly. There were many positive written comments stating that students had found the content interesting. Examples of the written feedback were:
'[Conceptual Issues in Psychology] was the most interesting Psychology I have ever studied... I am glad indeed that I come to Gloucester University.'
'I found studying the history of psychology very interesting.'

Foundations of Psychology module evaluation
Again the responses to the closed questions were very positive, although five students disagreed with the question 'Participating in this module has stimulated my interest in the subject.' Again there were many positive written comments. Two examples are:
'The lecturers' positions on the subject are intriguing and have given a different perspective to psychology and its scientific status in society.'
'There are some dry areas in this module but delivered with passion and full credit for that alone! On the whole though my interest has been stimulated in the subject, particularly research design and statistics, which I look forward to continuing next semester.'

Challenges

We feel that introducing conceptual issues and the debate about the nature of psychology as science and/or social construction early in the degree has been positive. Whether or not this is used by students throughout their degree is something we will attempt to evaluate as the first cohort works their way through the degree. However we feel that promoting a way of evaluating psychology theory and praxis including knowledge of methodology and understanding psychology in its social context early in the degree is beneficial, especially in terms of promoting critical thought about the discipline.

Conclusion

We have suggested that there are at least three models of delivering CHIP in an undergraduate degree. One is to consider individual issues within other topics. Another is to separately deliver coverage of history of psychology and of conceptual issues. A third is to offer integrated coverage of conceptual and historical issues where history can be used to develop conceptual analysis. We feel that the third approach offers a number of important benefits to student learning. One is that students develop as better critical thinkers, who are more questioning of received wisdom. Another is that students gain skills to better sustain argument and critical analysis. Finally, students have increased recognition of the need to understand the relationship between psychology and social context. Such are the benefits, we believe that this should be offered at the earliest stage of the degree, developing a disposition towards their learning that students then apply throughout their programmes and beyond.

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