



A History of Psychology in the United Kingdom Meeting of Minds – the road to professional practice

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Background

Robert M. Young wrote in 1966 that the history of psychology has suffered from a tendency to limit itself to detailing ‘great men (whom to worship?), great insights, and great dates.’¹ I apologize in advance if this paper giving a brief overview of the history of psychology, primarily through the story of the British Psychological Society (BPS), has indeed fallen Young’s linear, hagiographic trap. Young’s comment was a response to an article about ‘the first’ psychological laboratory in Germany, published in the 1965 inaugural issue of the journal *History of Behavioural Science*. That issue also contained an editorial arguing for the demise of ‘the anachronistic search for ‘firsts and founders.’² Over 50 years after Young’s prediction the history of psychology is, with some notable exceptions³ still depicted as a series of timelines of greats and firsts.⁴

Today, the British Psychological Society is recognized as the professional membership organization setting the standards, providing support, and acting as a forum for British psychologists throughout their careers as well as promoting the public understanding of psychology. This paper considers how the Society developed into that body, even for a short period being responsible for registration of chartered psychologists before that function was, in 2009, transferred to the HPC. The BPS and its route to defining, supporting and developing a profession is, I suggest, less the work of one person, initiative, or single creating event but more by way of Kuhnian⁵ paradigm shift with a group of influential people initiating a change of thought from possibly competing personal ideas to broad shared assumptions. A mature scientific community, Kuhn argues, has a set of received beliefs, which form the basis of an ‘educational initiation that prepares and licenses the student for professional practice.’⁶

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¹ Young, R.M. (1966). *Scholarship and the history of the behavioural sciences*, *History of Science*, 5, 36.

² Stocking, G. Jr (1965). *On the limits of presentism and historicism in the historiography of the behavioural sciences*, *Journal of the History of Behavioural Sciences*, 1, 214.

³ ‘It is widely accepted that it is no longer possible to write encyclopaedic ‘grand narratives’ of the history of psychology’, Bunn (2001) Introduction (page 15) in Bunn, Lovie, Richards (Eds) *Psychology in Britain*. BPS Books/Science Museum.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_psychology, <http://origins.bps.org.uk/>, <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/History%20of%20Psychology/A%20Chronology%20of%20Psychology%20in%20Britain.pdf>, <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/beta.bps.org.uk/files/History%20of%20Psychology/Timeline%20of%20the%20BPS%201901%20to%202009.pdf>, <https://www.bps.org.uk/about-us/history-psychology-centre>

⁵ Kuhn, Thomas (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.

⁶ *Ibid.* (Page 5).

Ten Men (and Women)

Today's British Psychological Society bears the influence of those who founded it on the 24 October 1901, at University College London (UCL). Sir James Sully, author of 'Outlines of Psychology' (1884) and UCL Grote Professor of Mind and Logic since 1892, had invited ten men and women⁷ to attend. Although an informal discussion group⁸ was already in existence, it was this meeting which agreed that the ten (Sully, Robert Armstrong-Jones, William George Smith, William Boyce Gibson, Sophie Bryant, Frank Noel Hales, William McDougall⁹, Frederick Mott, W. H. R. Rivers and Alexander Falkner Shand), should create an organization 'to advance scientific psychological research and to further cooperation of investigators in the different branches of psychology.'¹⁰ This declaration pre-empted a universal understanding and agreement of what psychology encompassed¹¹ – literature, practice and teaching were taking place but were in their infancy. These founders were themselves holding posts whose official titles ranged over philosophy, psychiatry, medicine, law, education and theology and within those roles were trying either to embed new ideas and techniques in newly created posts or to stretch the boundaries and emphasis when taking over existing positions. To differentiate themselves from an amateur specialist interest society it was further decided that any new members should be restricted to those who were '*recognized* teachers in some branch of psychology... or who have published work of *recognized* value'¹² [my italics]. Not only that but it was further agreed that potential members not only had to have their names approved by an Executive Committee but also to obtain a two-third majority at a general meeting of existing members. As arbiters of that definition and criteria, they then proposed the names of their colleagues to invite as members, presumably bypassing the process just agreed. These included Professor James Ward, (who had written on 'psychology' in the 1886 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica after Sully refused to do so), Professor George Stout, Professor Samuel Alexander, Francis Galton (who did not accept until offered an Honorary Fellowship in 1905), Professor Lloyd Morgan, Professor Sherrington, Beatrice Edgell, Professor Gotch, W. E. Johnson, Alice Woods, Carveth Read (who succeeded Sully to the Grote professorship), and Dr George Savage and Dr Charles Mercier. There is not space to outline all their careers, but they were predominantly working in academia, setting up early laboratories and as discussed in another paper in this collection many of these British 'psychologists' joining the nascent Society had recently spent time visiting or studying psychology taking place in continental universities and laboratories.

⁷ <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/History%20of%20Psychology/Founding%20Members%20of%20the%20Society.pdf>

⁸ *Ibid.* According to the biographical profile of McDougall, who was Sully's assistant at UCL 'informal discussions in his laboratory and gathered there a small group of people interested in psychology. This group formed the nucleus of the British Psychological Society.'

⁹ *Ibid.* According to the biographical profile of William McDougall, who was Sully's assistant at UCL 'informal discussions in his laboratory and gathered there a small group of people interested in psychology. This group formed the nucleus of the British Psychological Society.' BPS Archives BPS/00111 BPS British Psychological Society Minutes Vol I. IS 1901–1922.

¹⁰ 10 BPS Archives BPS/00111 BPS British Psychological Society Minutes Vol I. IS 1901–1922.

¹¹ James Ward had written an article 'psychology' for the ninth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1886) which was revised in the 11th edition (1911) and then elaborated on in 'Psychological Principles' (1918).

¹² *Op Cite* 10. *Ibid.*

Spheres of influence

The BPS was initially a forum for members to meet, eat, read papers and discuss their ideas. 'On a Saturday afternoon. . . they would sit and listen to a paper. . . mix discussion with tobacco smoke and having paused to take tea together they would settle down again for another paper and another discussion. Finally, a few cronies, not satisfied with a four hours orgy of psychology, would crown the day by dining together in the evening. And at these meetings papers were read which afterwards became part of the permanent literature of psychology. . . . one of the main aims of the society was to nurse the infant science and foster its growth by experiment and research.'¹³ Beatrice Edgell later described these as occasions, which 'did much to promote mutual understanding and to stimulate new ideas.'¹⁴ Without a dedicated publication for their papers and discussions, Stout suggested a connection with *Mind*, which he edited, but negotiations ended when it became clear that Ward and Rivers were planning to start what would become in 1904 the *British Journal of Psychology* (BJP). The BJP guaranteed space for Society information and proceedings and provided another outlet for dissemination and exchange of knowledge.¹⁵

It is difficult to ascertain in these early years whether having a Society was making a difference to the development of psychology, spreading of ideas, and growing consensus or whether it was the interconnectedness between individuals or even the effect from 1904 of a dedicated psychological journal.

For example, Charles Myers, both on the original Board of the BJP, and from 1904 Secretary of the Society, had been a Cambridge student of one of the ten BPS founders (W. H. R. Rivers) and invited by him on the 1898 Torres Straits expedition. Back in England in 1902 Myers assisted Rivers to lecture on 'physiology of the special senses', and whilst holding a Chair at King College London between 1906 and 1909, he began experimental research in London before returning to Cambridge, taking over the Rivers lectureship and funding the first purpose-built UK laboratory in 1912.¹⁶ After World War I, in 1921 Myers began another new initiative that not only developed the profession but also increased influence and networking. The NIIP (National Institute of Industrial Psychology) became a major source of employment for occupational psychologists, only closing in 1976.

One of both Rivers' and Myers' students was Frederick Bartlett, who, in 1922, became the Director of the Myers' Cambridge laboratory. Such was the influence of the 'Cambridge School' of experimental psychology that Hearnshaw calculated that by 1960 more than half of the chairs of psychology in the United Kingdom had been trained by Bartlett.¹⁷ Bartlett did not see psychological knowledge as static, and his obituarist praised Bartlett's ability to revise and review his ideas and techniques to meet changing circumstances throughout his long career.¹⁸ During the Second World War, Bartlett undertook research for the Air Ministry, assisted by Kenneth Craik. Bartlett recommended in 1944 that Craik be the first Director of the innovative Cambridge based Medical

¹³ *Times Educational Supplement* (1919), April 24 1919 (Page 193)

¹⁴ Beatrice Edgell (1947) *The British Psychological Society 1901–1941* (Page 115) in the *British Journal of Psychology* Vol 37, May 1947.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (Page 118).

¹⁶ Rivers had originally established a psychological laboratory at Cambridge in 1897 the same year he was appointed lecturer at the University.

¹⁷ Hearnshaw, L. S. (1964). *A short history of British Psychology 1840–1940* (Page 219). Methuen & Co., London.

¹⁸ Broadbent, D. (1970). *Sir Frederick Bartlett: An Appreciation* in *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society* 23. (Page 3)

Research Council Applied Psychology Unit (APU),¹⁹ still active as the ‘MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit’.

It was not just at Cambridge that Bartlett, Myers and Rivers exerted their influence; they all edited the *British Journal of Psychology*, which, once Myers had assumed sole editorship in 1914, became a BPS publication.

Psychology for all – membership

There were not enough applicants willing and able to meet the original membership criteria to sustain the young Society, which struggled to collect sufficient subscriptions to create both an organizational infrastructure and maintain a publication. Sandy Lovie has described in detail²⁰ how in 1919 Myers forced the Society to accept proposals to widen membership to those ‘interested in psychology’. Myers also suggested that in order to prevent rival organizations being formed, the Society form specialist ‘Sections’ for those researching, working in (and now of course ‘interested in’) applied psychological areas including medicine, education and industry. These Sections, he suggested, should be able to elect their own members who would then also be members of the Society (after ratification by the Council). This ‘represented a massive shift in power away from the centralising and professional members of the old Society.’²¹ During Myers’ First World War RAMC activities, he had met many medics, some treating shell-shock, and now used his contacts to persuade over two hundred of them to join the Society. Lovie notes that none of these new members had ‘any formal expertise in psychology’, nor teaching experience or the publication of some ‘magnum opus psychologicus.’²² Membership in 1918 totalled 98, but by the end of the following year, it had reached 427. Beatrice Edgell recalled that ‘The informal and intimate form of discussion which had characterized the early years was not possible in the larger gatherings of members who had varying interests and different levels of psychological training. Some of the older members. . . felt that some of the papers read lacked breadth of outlook and were trivial in character, even though they purported to have some immediate practical interest’.²³

Professional status

Two external issues reopened the question of the definition of a psychologist. Firstly, a 1929 request for names of British ‘psychologists’ to be included in the Psychological Register, produced to coincide with the International Psychological Congress being held in Yale, led to a debate about the ‘status’ of the now wider membership. The Society agreed that from 1931 both existing and new members should provide information on their ‘degrees, diplomas, academic standing, publications and membership of other learned Societies and this would form a list’.²⁴

¹⁹ The APU was renamed the *Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit (CBU)* in 1998. See also Wellcome Witness Seminar 12 June 2001 *The MRC Applied Psychology Unit* <http://www.histmodbiomed.org/sites/default/files/44838.pdf>

²⁰ Lovie (2001) *Three Steps to Heaven How the British Psychological Society Attained Its Place in the Sun (Pages 95–114)* in Bunn, Lovie, Richards (Eds) *Psychology in Britain*. BPS Books/Science Museum.

²¹ *Ibid* (page 101).

²² *Ibid* (page 102).

²³ *Op Cite* 12 Edgell (1947) (page 122)

²⁴ *Ibid* (page 127).

Secondly, by 1934 the fashionable interest in psychological testing was worrying the Society. Some 'of those who were actually using tests for various purposes, and even devising new tests, had not had the psychological training necessary to safeguard the methods from abuse and the public from exploitation.'^{25,26} A 'Professional Status Committee' was convened to inquire into this problem. A 1937 debate by Members on 'What is a Qualified Psychologist and for What Work should he be Qualified?' led to a consensus 'that the Society ought to protect the interests of trained psychologists, and that by requiring a high standard of professional training from everyone admitted to a certain category of membership, it would enable the public who made use of the services of such members to be ensured against inefficiency and charlatanism.'²⁷ It was clear that the list and information they had been keeping since 1931 was not going to be sufficient in recognising qualifications and safeguarding what could now be seen as 'professional interests'. The constitution needed to allow for different grades of membership, so that there could be 'professional register'.

In 1941, the Society became a limited company, having been advised that this was a necessary first step towards obtaining a Royal Charter. Under this new constitution, they were obliged to maintain a member register including qualifications and appointments. There were now two application forms for potential members to complete – one concerning nominees and personal details and the other detailing academic qualifications – date and university as well as whether psychology was included as part of the qualifying examination for the degree or diploma and whether psychology was part of any thesis. Other information requested included employment history, offices held and any 'psychological publications'. A registrar maintained these forms; however in 1946 when the Society's home in Tavistock Square was engulfed in flames, the membership records were destroyed, and existing members were later asked to resubmit their information. Membership of the Society was of course voluntary for those who considered themselves psychologists. An important step was another change to the constitution in 1958 whereby full membership was limited to candidates possessing a degree in which psychology had comprised the main subject. Psychological education had come a long way from 1901.

Professional employment

There were several factors to the growth between the 1930s and the 1960s of those earning their living as psychologists outside the academic arena. One being the employment opportunities, knowledge and research for industrial or occupational psychologists via the NIIP and other routes mentioned above; another was the establishment of the child guidance clinics which having begun in 1927 became viewed as necessities during wartime upheaval. The 1944 Education Act made it easier for local authorities to establish new clinics, and by 1955, three hundred were open. Lucy Fildes created a committee to consider training and education for those working this area in

²⁵ A BPS Committee on Test Standards was formed in 1958, and after 1968 becoming the Standing Committee on Test Standards, it began vetting courses for non-psychologists in the use of tests. The successor Steering Committee on Test Standards founded in 1987 reviewed courses and encouraged test publishers to only sell tests to customers who had been trained in their use. In 1991, a BPS certificate of competence in occupational testing launched, with a certificate of competence (at two levels) and the creation of a Register of Competence in Occupational Testing (RCOT), later the RCPT Register of Competence in Psychological Testing.

²⁶ *Ibid* (130).

²⁷ Memorandum to all Members of the Society concerning the legal registration of Psychologists in the UK. Annual Report 1973–1974 (page 28). British Psychological Society.

1943. Not long after this, there was, also a clamour to support psychologists employed in the new National Health Service, founded in 1948. After its initial work the 'Fildes Committee' became the BPS 'Committee of Professional Psychologists' widening its remit from child psychologists to include adult care and splitting into separate Scottish and English Committees, to cover the differently regulated health services in those countries.

By 1959, the Scottish and English Divisions of Professional Psychologists (Mental Health) had replaced the Committees. 'Division' being the new category of Society section restricted to professional psychologists. A name change to the English Division of Professional Psychologists (Education and Clinical) was a prelude to yet another restructure in 1966. Different specialties wanted their own Divisions and so the Division of Educational & Child Psychology DECP and a separate Division of Clinical Psychologists DCP were founded, both of which flourish today. There are now (2018) 10 Divisions of the Society covering professionals working in forensic, occupational, counselling, health, neuropsychology, sport and exercise, and academic psychology amongst others.

A Society Committee on Training in Psychology began work in 1950. The following year, together with the Committee of Professional Psychologists, it hosted a conference for psychology department heads, where they jointly considered how to increase standards in psychology. The Committee on Training not only began a system of approvals of UK psychology degrees and postgraduate courses but also began its own postgraduate training schemes starting in 1968 with a Diploma in Clinical Psychology. Today the Society organizes a wide range of postgraduate qualifications, which are externally recognized by the Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC). Between 1974 and 2010, a Society membership qualification examination was held for those with overseas or unaccredited degrees.

The campaign for registration

A Royal Charter was finally obtained in 1965, an application to the Privy Council having made by the BPS President, Donald Broadbent, one of Bartlett's protégés having taken over Directorship of the APU in 1958. However, the Society's primary aim, identified in the 1930s, was to have a statutory recognize standard for all those who described themselves as psychologists. Under the 1965 Charter members were forbidden to refer to their membership in advertisements in the press or elsewhere. A committee, with Divisional representation, established in 1969, asked members to approve a proposal that Parliament should pass an act for the legal registration of psychologists in the United Kingdom. They advised that the Society had achieved the correct stage in its growth to achieve this through three tests: firstly, having a range of professional practices for which a knowledge of psychology for an essential prerequisite; secondly being a recognized body able to pronounce 'an authoritative opinion on the qualifications and training necessary to undertake these practices'²⁸ and thirdly, having enough experience for codes of professional practice to be formulated and their observance ensured.

It was not until 1987 when a legal device called an Order in Council amended the 1965 Charter allowing the Society to maintain a register of 'Chartered Psychologists'. The statutory order meant that only appropriately qualified and experienced members, who had accepted the Society's code of conduct, were able to use that title. The Register aimed to 'provide members of the public with a ready means of distinguishing properly qualified

²⁸ *Annual Report 1987–1988. (Page 7) British Psychological Society.*

psychologists for self-styled practitioners who use the title even though they have no formal qualifications in psychology.²⁹ The published Register included a note 'there are some properly qualified psychologists who have chosen not to register. The names of those psychologists do not appear in the Register.'³⁰ The Society was unable to follow up on complaints made about non-members nor stop members, struck off the Register from continuing to practise.

The campaign for compulsory registration continued with attempts by the Society to bring in private members bills in 1994, 1995 and 1997. The BPS President wrote to the Secretary of State for Health 'At present anyone in the UK can call themselves a psychologist, and practice on vulnerable clients, whether or not they have any training or qualifications'.³¹ The Society lobbied for amendments to the 1999 Health bill to include a clause to allow for statutory registration of psychologists via another statutory order. The Government agreed that the case was 'well made' but declined to allot parliamentary time to the issue, although in 2002 a Health Professions Council was established³² and the Society went into the queue with other 'professions' awaiting regulation. It was not until 2009 that the HPC³³ began a register of 'Practitioner Psychologists' based upon the standard for chartered psychologists set by the BPS.

The BPS welcomed the fact that the existing high standard was maintained in the transition from a voluntary to a compulsory register. 'We represent the consensus of the profession in knowing what level of education and training is required before a psychologist is deemed safe to practice independently and this level has been agreed with the largest public sector employers – the health and education services. ... However, we are disappointed that our advice to protect the title 'psychologist' was not taken on board, as this would have been comprehensive and less confusing for the public.'³⁴

The renamed HCPC protects 'Clinical Psychologist', 'Counselling Psychologist', 'Educational Psychologist', 'Forensic Psychologist', 'Health psychologist', 'Occupational psychologist', 'Practitioner psychologist', 'Registered psychologist', and 'Sport and exercise psychologist'.³⁵

The British Psychological Society is currently considering how to restart the campaign for the descriptor 'psychologist' to be a protected title meaning that those who use it have met agreed standards and benchmarks. Although it may be argued that British Psychological Society has by accrediting training and setting standards for *professional practice* met the Kuhnian standard of a mature community – a set of beliefs which underpin a 'educational initiation that prepares and licenses the student for professional practice,' there is still more to do.

²⁹ *The Register of Chartered Psychologists (1990) (Page II)*. British Psychological Society

³⁰ BPS Archives. BPS/001111/03/01115 Press Releases 1997.

³¹ *Established under the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002.*

³² *HPC became the Health and Care Professions Council HCPC under the Health and Social Care Act 2012.*

³³ BPS Archives. BPS/001111/03/01127 Press Releases 2009.

³⁴ <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/registration/getting-on-the-register/>

³⁵ *Op Cite. 5 (Page 5).*