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Chapter 6

Psychology at McMaster

by

*P. Lynn Newbigging**

The Department of Psychology at McMaster came into formal existence on July 1, 1958.¹ At that time the departments of the University were grouped into two colleges, University College which included the humanities and social sciences, and Hamilton College which included the physical and biological sciences and engineering. On its formation, the Department of Psychology was located in University College. This was a matter of some disappointment to those of us here at the time (D.W. Carment, L.J. Kamin, P.L. Newbigging) since it was our intention to emphasize experimental psychology in the development of the Department and it seemed to us that the accomplishment of this would be facilitated were we viewed as one of the natural sciences and administratively grouped with them. This administrative arrangement was in fact achieved in 1962² and thereby hangs a tale whose telling I will delay for the moment until some background has been provided.

The early history of psychology at McMaster probably exhibits many points of similarity to that at other universities. The subject has been taught here since 1888, the year following the granting of the University's charter by the Ontario Legislature. Through the early decades the courses in psychology were offered by the Department of Philosophy until, in 1947, that department was renamed the Department of Philosophy and Psychology. The reasons for this re-naming seem not to be a matter of record but presumably reflect the intention of the chancellor and other academic administrators to strengthen the work in psychology beyond the two undergraduate courses then offered. It is recorded in the

* Professor Newbigging joined the Faculty of McMaster University in 1955 and was the Chairman of the Department of Psychology there from 1958 to 1964, from 1968 to 1972 and again from 1981-

University Senate minutes of the meeting of February, 1946,³ as part of a discussion of faculty needs, that a full-time teacher of psychology should be appointed. The background of both members of the Department of Philosophy who were then teaching the psychology courses (Introductory and Social) was in theology and philosophy.

In the event, it wasn't until 1953 that R.H. Nicholson was appointed to the full-time faculty, the first person trained as a psychologist ever to be so appointed. Nicholson was tempted away from the University by the Ontario Hydro in 1955, but during his two years here he increased the number of the under-graduate courses from two to four⁴ as the beginning towards the introduction of an undergraduate degree in psychology, and in other ways laid the groundwork for further development. I was appointed in 1955 to replace Nicholson. Significant dates and events of the immediately subsequent years are: 1957, the establishment of an Honours B.A. programme; 1958, authorization to offer the M.A. degree; 1959, authorization to offer the Ph.D. degree.⁵ In 1963 the first two Ph.D. degrees in psychology were conferred by the University while in the period 1959 to 1963 inclusive, twenty M.A. degrees were conferred.⁶

In these changed days when proposed Ph.D. programmes in Ontario universities must survive planning and quality assessments before being considered by the government for funding, it is amusing to note that in 1959 when our Ph.D. programme was authorized by the University the Department had been in existence for only one year and had four faculty members (A.H. Black, D.W. Carment, L.J. Kamin and P.L. Newbigging), two of whom were new assistant professors (Black had been appointed in 1958 and Carment had completed his Ph.D. and had just been promoted from Instructor), and two newly promoted to Associate Professor. It is doubtful that a proposal from such a group to offer Ph.D. studies would receive serious consideration today.

Since 1959 the Department has grown at a rate of slightly more than one additional faculty member each year to reach its present size of twenty-four. Graduate student numbers have also grown and in recent years have stabilized at approximately fifty. The teaching and research interests of the faculty, now and in the past, are fairly reflected in the following tabulation by field of the M.A. and Ph.D. theses written by students in the Department over the years 1959 to the spring of 1976. It will be noted from the table that there are no theses on applied topics and this represents the outcome of a deliberate decision taken early in the department's life that we would develop an exclusively experimental department and thus concentrate our resources rather than spread them over a wide range of subject matter. It has long been my view that experimental and applied psychology are almost distinct disciplines,

TABLE I M.A. and Ph.D. theses by field, 1959-1976

Type of Subject	Field of Psychology	M.A.	Ph.D.	
Human	Cognitive	9	3	
	Developmental	4	3	
	Learning	6	—	
	Perception & Psychophysics	12	12	
	Physiological	3	1	
	Social	5	3	
		39	22	61
Animal	Animal Behaviour	4	2	
	Learning	18	14	
	Perception	2	3	
	Physiological	18	13	
		42	32	74
Totals		81	54	135

based on different values and with different objectives, and that each would prosper better if these differences were acknowledged by administrative separation.

This decision to concentrate faculty resources in experimental psychology was perhaps particularly important because it was coupled with another one; that was to keep the Department as small as possible given our responsibility to provide a broad education in psychology to undergraduate students whose numbers here as elsewhere burgeoned during the 1960's. The Department is still relatively small compared to those in other universities of comparable size but large enough, in our view, to provide viable groups with overlapping interests in the various fields of experimental psychology.

Let me go back now and describe chronologically those people and events that gave early direction to the development of the work in psychology here, a direction that I believe is preserved in the Department today.

The first influence of significance was undoubtedly that exerted by R.B. MacLeod whose wisdom and advice many of us have had occasion to value over the years. I had met MacLeod while I was at the University of

New Brunswick (1953–55). He visited there as he did other Canadian departments in the course of his survey of Canadian psychology for the Social Science Research Council.⁷ One of the first things I did on my arrival at McMaster was to write to him to ask for his advice, particularly on setting up an undergraduate curriculum, but also more generally on the development of a department. The upshot was that he invited me to visit him at Cornell and he arranged introductions for me to the departments at Bryn Mawr, Bucknell, and the University of Pennsylvania. It was his thought that we could more effectively discuss matters of curriculum and department development face to face. The visits to the Bryn Mawr and Bucknell departments were particularly instructive since they each had ten to twelve faculty members, a size to which it seemed, at that time, McMaster might aspire.

These visits took place in November 1956. What specifically came of them is now lost to my memory except that, with MacLeod's encouragement, we set up here an undergraduate curriculum modeled on the Wolfe Report.⁸ Over the next few years MacLeod remained a source of considerable help, particularly in the recruitment of faculty.

Of course, the most significant influences in the development of any department are those exerted by the members of its faculty. On those grounds there is no question that the nature of McMaster's Department owes a very great deal to D.W. Carmet and L.J. Kamin who were both appointed in 1957 as Lecturer and Assistant Professor, respectively. The three of us formed a close working relationship from the beginning and were able always to represent psychology's needs to the administration with one voice.

At the time of his appointment, Carmet had just completed the residence requirements for his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto where he worked with Ketchum and Joyner. He completed his dissertation at McMaster and established a laboratory for work in experimental social psychology.

Kamin had completed his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1954 with R.L. Solomon and that same year came to Canada as a research associate with Bindra at McGill where he remained for one year. In 1955, on Julian Blackburn's invitation, he went to Queen's as a research associate and remained through 1956–57 as an Assistant Professor.

I met Kamin in Kingston in the fall of 1955 and again at the C.P.A. meeting in Ottawa in 1956. We had corresponded in the interim with a view to his moving to McMaster in the fall of 1956. McMaster was slow in taking the administrative action necessary to bring this about. At that time McMaster was a Baptist university with an eminent theologian, G.P. Gilmour, as its Chancellor and President. As was generally the case in

denominational universities, the president had the ultimate authority in all matters, holding only those consultations which he deemed necessary and desirable. This was the situation in those years at McMaster and while Gilmour exercised his authority with wisdom and charity, exercise it he did.

In particular, he reserved final decision in all cases of faculty appointment. During 1955-56 he was heavily preoccupied by negotiations with the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec which culminated in McMaster becoming a secular institution in 1957. The consequence was that we were not in a position to make Kamin an offer until the late spring of 1956 and his feelings of responsibility to Queen's, and I think also his affection for Blackburn, led him to decline. Continued negotiations resulted in his acceptance of an offer from us and his arrival here in the fall of 1957. He remained here eleven years, including a term as chairman, until enticed away in 1968 to chair the Department at Princeton.

Kamin brought with him an active programme of research which he vigorously pursued over the years. He was already gaining recognition as an accomplished experimental psychologist and without doubt that fact added credibility to our claim within the University that psychology was a science and, for administrative purposes, would be most appropriately grouped with other science departments. As I have already noted, that arrangement did ultimately come about and I now turn to a description of the events that were responsible for it.

Through the 1950's and into the early 1960's the undergraduate curriculum at McMaster, particularly in science, was rigidly prescribed leaving students few options even in their freshman year. We were anxious to attract some students with an interest in science into honours psychology but the curriculum made it impossible for the students in Year I Science to take our introductory course and so develop an interest in the subject. This situation we set about to try to change.

As alluded to above, the departments of the University at that time were organized administratively into two colleges: University College which included the humanities and social sciences, and Hamilton College which included the sciences and engineering. Each college had its own principal who reported directly to the president. The faculty, however, cut across this division and met as a single Faculty of Arts and Science which was administered by a senior dean. It was into a meeting of this faculty in the winter of 1958 that we introduced a motion that an opportunity be made available to science students to take first year psychology. The proposal sparked a lively debate, finding considerable support among the humanists and social scientists but none at all among the scientists. The attitude of the scientists was simple; it was that

psychology was not a science and therefore courses in psychology did not belong in a science curriculum. The arguments they brought forward in support of their view were undoubtedly shaped by their own backgrounds in psychology which were dated by two decades and consisted of one or two courses taught for the most part by philosophers and theologians. The general tone was represented by a senior member of the chemistry department who prefaced his remarks in opposition by defining psychology for us as "the study of individual souls" (I think a definition of sociology was implied), surely not the stuff of science. Our motion was not voted on at that meeting but at a later, poorly attended one, when it carried twenty-three in favour and nineteen opposed.⁹ The amusing thing was that the twenty-three in favour, apart from ourselves, were all humanists or social scientists; those opposed were scientists to a man. Thus, by being rejected by both sides, we got what we wanted. At a meeting of the Senate in October, 1959 this faculty decision was approved and science students were from then on able to complete their Year I which required physics, chemistry and mathematics with a choice of two from among biology, geology, a second mathematics and psychology.

Although initially relatively few science students availed themselves of the opportunity we had won for them the victory was by no means a hollow one, as at the present time some 20% of our honour students come from Year I Science. Further, the appearance of Introductory psychology as an acceptable Year I Science course facilitated the later acceptance of a B.Sc. Honour¹⁰ stream to accompany the B.A. stream, and as well paved the way for our administrative move from University to Hamilton College in 1962 and thus full acceptance as a science department.

This was an important event in shaping the subsequent development of the Department. The problem was, given our exclusive emphasis on experimental psychology, the costs in terms of space and equipment were high and it was difficult to convince administrators with a background in the humanities that these facilities were essential if the discipline was to prosper. Our move to Hamilton College meant that we were responsible to a principal with a training in science and our requirements were readily understandable to him. When in 1967 the Faculty of Arts and Science was divided into separate faculties, our membership in the Faculty of Science, where we are today, makes retrospectively our earlier petitioning all the more wise.

Over the years the Department has been favoured by strong administrative support which enabled us to appoint in the early years some faculty who had already established reputations in research—W. H. Heron (1960), H. M. Jenkins (1963), A. B. Kristofferson and R. M. Pritchard (1965)—and this aided immeasurably in establishing a productive teach-

ing and research atmosphere which enabled us to attract and hold the new Ph.D.'s to whom our major recruiting effort was addressed. Over the now eighteen years since the Department was founded, only eleven of those appointed to the faculty have left of their own accord for other places.

This relative stability of the Department can be accounted for in part by our slow growth which enabled new members to be integrated with those of us already here, in part by an equitable policy by the University in salaries and promotions, and perhaps most importantly, by the provision by the University of adequate space and equipment for the conduct of our work.

As with other departments our original space was in a temporary Army H-hut originally moved onto the campus to accommodate the influx of veterans in the immediate post-war years. As the Department grew, other temporary space was acquired and modified to our use. Such modified space can rarely provide the optimum in sound and temperature control needed for experimental psychology and in the mid-sixties we began to formulate plans for a permanent building. These plans were approved in 1967, the ground was broken in 1968 and we occupied the building in August, 1970. It provides some 57,000 sq. ft. of temperature- and sound-controlled usable space for research, offices and some classrooms, and has proved to be a splendidly workable building.

Last year we recruited our 24th member which fills the building according to the plan of its original construction. There seems here to be a fortunate conspiracy of circumstance since given the economic climate of the universities today, little if any expansion of faculty seems needed or, if needed, is economically possible. To maintain an intellectually viable department during what appears to be an extended no-growth period provides as much of a challenge as did the development of the Department in the expansionist 60's and early 70's. We will need all of our ingenuity to meet it.

References and Notes

¹ This was accomplished by a vote of the University Senate at a meeting held on January 28, 1958 and is recorded in the minutes of that meeting.

² The transfer was made on the decision of the then President and Vice-Chancellor, H.G. Thode, and made known to all faculty and administrative officers in a memorandum dated May 11, 1962. The significant paragraphs in that memorandum read as follows:

"During the past two years the transfer of this department has again been actively discussed and recently, for the purpose of curriculum, it has been agreed to include this department in the natural sciences division. As many activities of this department are closely allied to the life sciences, and because the research people of

this department secure their support from the same national agencies as do the members of our present science departments, it seems logical to follow the academic pattern and include psychology with the natural sciences for administrative purposes.

Accordingly, effective July 1, 1962, this department will be transferred from University College to Hamilton College."

³ University Senate Minutes, February 14, 1946.

⁴ See McMaster University Calendars 1953-54 and 1954-58.

⁵ The details of these programmes are to be found in the undergraduate and graduate calendars of these years.

⁶ The names of these students are recorded in the records of the School of Graduate Studies.

⁷ MacLeod, Robert B. *Psychology in Canadian Universities and Colleges*. Ottawa: Canadian Social Science Research Council, 1955.

⁸ Wolfle, Dael (Ed.), *Improving Undergraduate Education in Psychology*. New York: Macmillan, 1952.

⁹ These motions are to be found in the Minutes of the Faculty of Arts and Science dated December 17, 1958 and May 28, 1959.

¹⁰ First described in the 1962-63 McMaster University Calendar.

Further Readings

Newbigging, P.L. "A Note on Psychology at McMaster". *The Canadian Psychologist*, 1956, 5, 76-77.

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