# Can psychology REVOLUTIONISE HIGHER EDUCATION?

*Our members are a diverse bunch. The one area of common ground is that you have all got a psychology degree, or you are in the process of trying to get one. Maybe your contact with higher education has dwindled to an annual alumni newsletter – maybe you're still firmly lodged in the ivory tower, the 'eternal student' tackling your PhD or the earnest lecturer trying to pass on a bit of your hard-earned knowledge. But how often do you actually stop to think about whether what you have learnt could improve the student experience?*

*After all, understanding psychology and understanding university are both about 'life's rich tapestry': from burning the midnight oil over your textbooks to propping up the bar in the Union, from fleeing to mum and dad at the end of freshers' week with a big bundle of washing to never wanting to go home again, from inspirational teacher to monotone boffin, from first to fail. Psychology is about understanding all this behaviour. But it should be about more than that: as psychologists we should be using this knowledge to improve the student experience for all.*

*This is just the first part of our special feature, and over its course you will be the judge of whether psychology can revolutionise higher education. In this issue our authors take a look at what learning should involve, and at drinking, homesickness and the effect of knowing your 'personality type'. We have articles in the pipeline on debt, mental health, the foreign student, assessment, and whether lectures work. But don't just sit there, write something – we welcome your views on whether research and evidence in your area of psychology can revolutionise higher education. Send contributions of up to 400 words to me on jonsut@bps.org.uk, or ask about longer contributions.*

# Higher *for the era of*

CERTAIN colleges and universities are admired all over the world: Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne, the University of Bologna, the Ivy trio of Princeton, Yale and Harvard. These institutions did not begin as great universities: their respected status evolved over many hundreds of years. No doubt some portion of their success is due to luck; some to excellent management, generous financial resources, and prime location; other facets are perhaps due to the evolution of teaching practices that have been judged successful over the long run. But so far as I have been able to determine, the success of these institutions owes little to the conscious application of discoveries from psychology or other sciences. Put sharply, institutions evolve – successfully or unsuccessfully – chiefly by trial-and-error procedures, punctuated occasionally by more active interventions. They rarely if ever feature direct application of scientific findings.

Past practices are no guarantors of future policies. We may have reached the stage where psychology can usefully inform our colleges and universities. But we should be modest about our expectations, at least in the short run. In this article I examine three questions that one might ask of higher education: Why? What? and How? I put forth my own answers that have grown in part out of my research and thinking as a psychologist.

## WEBLINKS

Howard Gardner's website:

*www.pz.harvard.edu/PIs/HG.htm*

### Why educate?

Education is fundamentally an endeavour that entails values. One can never go directly from a scientific finding to an educational practice. A simple example illustrates the point. Just before *The Bell Curve* was published in 1994 I spoke to its senior author, my Harvard colleague Richard J. Herrnstein. On the basis of the evidence collected in that book, it seems difficult to alter psychometric intelligence. But what conclusions can be drawn from that fact? The two of us agreed that one could draw two diametrically opposite conclusions:

1. *Because IQ is difficult to change, we should not attempt to do so.*
2. *Because IQ is difficult to change, we should devote all of our efforts to achieving whatever changes are possible.*

Why do we educate individuals in general, and why do we seek to enrol an ever-larger percentage of individuals in developed countries in institutions of tertiary education? To take your own country as an example, why does the UK government want 50 per cent of 18–30 year olds in higher education by 2010?

There are many traditional rationales for higher education. Among these are the desire for a population that is broadly educated in the liberal arts; the need for well-trained professionals; the hope that civic-minded leaders will emerge from the graduates; the understandable desire, on the part of the professoriate, to renew itself; and perhaps the realisation that one needs perceptive and informed critics of society – in America, the Noam Chomskys and the Ralph Naders; in Europe, the Bertrand Russells and Jean-Paul Sartres.

I have sympathy for these various ends and agree that it is possible to achieve more than one of them. But today we need to add a new aspiration: the capacity to participate fully in the global society. In comparison with 100 or even 50 years ago, the young adult needs to understand and to cope with the major phenomena that characterise our contemporary world. Among these I would list

- the capacity to deal readily and comfortably with individuals from diverse cultural settings, millions of whom move from one land to another each year;
- an appreciation of the intricate multinational financial and marketing system that connects economies in an unprecedented manner;
- skill at sorting through huge amounts of instantly accessible information, much of it of dubious value; and
- an understanding of powerful media and technologies that shape public opinion and often generate strong reactions and counter-reactions.

No doubt, this list could be extended.

Even those who endorse the need to educate for a global society would concede that current tertiary education does not adequately address these issues. Education changes very slowly. We are still teaching

# education globalisation

**Howard Gardner** *on the potential – and limits – of applying psychological knowledge to learning.*

most of the same disciplines and subjects that were taught decades ago. And we still do so in ways that could have been readily recognised by our parents and grandparents: large lectures, encyclopedic textbooks, and – for those who are more fortunate – more intimate seminars, tutorials and laboratories.

I am not one of those who assume that changes are necessarily good. As I pointed out, the most respected educational institutions have changed through evolutionary rather than revolutionary means. Still, I believe that significant changes are in order for our colleges and universities, and I believe that, in bringing about these changes, we can receive valuable insights from psychology.

## What?

Let me turn to curricular issues. I believe that the scholarly disciplines are among the most important human inventions of the last few thousand years. The capacities to think mathematically, scientifically, historically or artistically represent enormous human achievements. The most important findings for education from the cognitive sciences document the difficulty of thinking in a disciplined way. Whatever the disciplinary area, it turns out to be much easier to teach facts and definitions than to inculcate scholarly ways of thinking and to achieve deep understandings of key phenomena. And it proves much easier to cover vast amounts of materials superficially than to probe deeply into the most important and vexed issues (Blythe, 1998; Cohen *et al*., 1993; Gardner, 1991, 1999b; Wiske, 1998).

This state of affairs suggests the following course. First, we need to determine which ideas and ways of thinking are most crucial in a discipline and to focus sharply on that material: depth trumps breadth. Second, in examining students, we must go beyond simply determining whether students remember what they have heard or read. We must pose new puzzles and problems, and determine whether students can use their knowledge and understanding to illuminate materials that are unfamiliar. Otherwise, for all that we know, the students have simply acquired what philosopher Alfred North Whitehead termed ‘inert knowledge’. Third, in view of the barrage of new knowledge that is accumulating, we must give students tools so that they can continue to educate themselves, once their formal education is at an end.

So far, the indicated regimen could have been employed in earlier eras. But the era of globalisation hurls a new challenge: the need to think in an interdisciplinary way. Many if not most of the vexing issues of our time – poverty, terrorism, ecological imbalance, social inequality, to name a few – require the capacity to think pluralistically, divergently, synergistically. Interdisciplinary thinkers are able to draw on a variety of methods and concepts in order to approach and solve problems that cannot be adequately resolved through traditional practices drawn from a single discipline (Boix-Mansilla & Gardner, 1999).

It would be misleading to suggest that psychology holds the key to engendering interdisciplinary thinking of high quality. Yet an instructor or faculty who wants to encourage interdisciplinary thinking can draw inspiration from various strands of psychology. I would mention studies of creative thinking (Amabile, 1996; Boden, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Gruber, 1981), critical thinking (Baron, 1985; Perkins, 1995) and analogical thinking (Gentner, 1989; Holyoak & Thagard, 1995). Equally important, though less evident, is the understanding of distributed knowledge (Lave & Weniger, 1991; Salomon, 1993). The key to interdisciplinary excellence may lie less in the mastery of several disciplines by a single individual, more in the capacity to work effectively with those who have mastered disciplines other than one’s own (Bennis & Biederman, 1997).

## How?

The contemporary era entails two imperatives: the need to educate the populace to a higher level, and the need to make optimal use of the new technologies. Until recently higher education has been primarily a process of selection: jurisdictions develop screening methods to select those students who are deemed most likely to benefit from tertiary education. But now, in an era where we will automate whatever we can, we must educate the population to be knowledgeable, creative and proactive professionals.

Over the past few decades I have developed a theory of multiple intelligences and explored the educational implications of that theory. Briefly, I claim that all human beings possess a set of relatively autonomous intelligences, and that individuals differ in the profiles of intelligences that they exhibit at any one time (Gardner, 1993a, 1993b, 1999a). Traditionally, education has sought to select individuals who have a combination of linguistic and logical intelligence – the future law professor for example. Those who do not exhibit that profile of intelligences have been marginalised.

Kate Grey

It is possible to turn this situation on its head. Instead of searching for those individuals with a blend of linguistic and logical intelligence, we should instead try to understand each individual's distinctive profile of intelligences. Then, as far as possible, we should seek to instruct each person in ways that are complementary to his or her profile of intelligences. We should also assess individuals in ways that allow them to demonstrate their understandings and their continuing misunderstandings.

While such an individualised education has always been true in theory, in practice it has only been accessible to the wealthy – those who could afford personal tutors. In an age of increasingly sophisticated software and hardware, however, it is rapidly becoming possible to offer each person an individualised education. No need for a teacher to say that she can only teach calculus or geography or genetics in one way; we will have software that can teach these disciplines in a number of ways, that is infinitely patient and can continually adjust in terms of what individual students do and do not understand.

Far from making teachers expendable, however, such individualised technology will liberate teachers to do what the technology cannot do. Here I can draw on my own experience in teaching a course on cognitive development. Three years ago I decided to record all of my lectures developed over the past decade and to make them available to my students on the intranet. At the same time I made a commitment to remain in class for the same number of hours per week that I had previously devoted to lecturing. During this freed-up time we now have the opportunity to discuss, debate, role play, carry out various kinds of experiments, and perhaps most important, work together to synthesise our emerging knowledge. Nostalgia for a semester of live lecturing is virtually nonexistent. While the new dispensation involves much more work on the part of both teachers and students, the increase in genuine learning seems palpable.

This year, we have converted the class into an interdisciplinary one. Expanding from a semester to a year, and adding a new cohort of professors and teaching fellows, we are now teaching about cognitive development, the brain and education. It is a tall order, and it will doubtless take us some years to get the course into strong shape. However, such a trend seems to me virtually an imperative because of three factors: the exploding nature of knowledge in these fields; the need to train interdisciplinary thinkers; and the availability of technology that allows individualised paths of learning.

## Conclusion

I do not accept the premise that psychology – or indeed any science or social science – can in itself bring about dramatic changes in education. Indeed, someone innocent of psychology could institute the changes I have suggested. Even if the intent is to bring about changes radically, the nature of institutional change ensures that changes will occur at an evolutionary pace. Still, I believe that any person with a career involvement in education ought to keep abreast of findings in the psychological and brain sciences. I also believe that insights from various lines of psychology can inform the thinking and the practices of educators – though the test should always be whether desired results are obtained (and not whether it reflects one's pet theory!). My enterprise here has been threefold: to outline new expectations for higher education in an era of globalisation; to suggest how disciplinary and interdisciplinary study ought to be pursued; and to indicate how findings about individual differences and the accessibility of powerful technologies might combine to educate a far greater portion of the population than in times past.

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# Alcohol consumption on the campus

**Barry T. Jones** *looks at how psychological theory might explain and tackle student drinking culture, and why we need to find out more.*

RIOTOUS drinking games, freshers' week, alcohol-fuelled traffic cone theft and risky sex – irresponsible alcohol consumption is traditionally held to be one of the defining features of university undergraduate life. Excessive drinking at university is viewed as a right of passage, calming down after graduation as commitments increase and timetables fill in. Indeed, the evidence is that the greater proportion emerges unscathed (e.g. Gotham *et al.*, 1997). But there is equally good evidence that many do not (e.g. Barnes *et al.*, 1992), and that the groundwork put in during undergraduate years is a risk factor for a subsequently disastrous drinking career.

The aetiology of long-term, heavy drinking has been the focus of psychological interest for many years, and because undergraduates are generally at the young end of this timeline and readily available research fodder, their drinking habits have attracted a lot of attention. So what have we learnt, what might be done to curb problem drinking at university, and what gaps are there in our knowledge?

## How much and how often?

Numerous studies carried out in the US and Canada confirm the popular view that students generally have quite a penchant for a pint. For example, in these countries, young adults (18–21s) have the highest alcohol consumption levels (e.g. Chen & Kandel, 1995) and the highest alcohol problem count (Grant, 1997) of all age groups. Critically, however, it is the students of this 18–21 age group not the non-students who drink more, binge more and have more alcohol problems (Johnston *et al.*, 1999). In studies of this sort, binge drinking is usually defined quite liberally as five or more drinks in a row, and many studies have shown that more than half of student consumption is of this type (e.g. Wechsler *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, although US per capita consumption has declined in the last 10 years, student bingeing (particularly among females) is increasing (Keeling, 2002; NIAAA, 1999). These heavy sessions have heavy consequences: binge-drinking associates with poorer academic records in general (Wood *et al.*, 1997), and poorer grade point average in particular (Wolaver, 2002). It also impacts negatively on the sleep and work activities of students who drink more responsibly (Wechsler *et al.*, 2000).

Of course, it is possible that these observations generalise poorly to the UK, where students can legally buy and consume alcohol at the age of 18 rather than 21. For example, if alcohol is more readily available to UK students, there might not be the need or tendency for them to binge drink, as compared with their US counterparts who might do this because of its more intermittent availability. After all, this sort of thinking in relation to alcohol availability was partly behind a previous UK government's proposal to extend the length of time licensed premises could be open, and the current UK government's proposal to extend opening hours even further. Disturbingly, however, the single, peer-reviewed study reporting a UK–US comparison (Delk & Meilman, 1996) has shown that UK students consume twice as much alcohol and binge twice as often as their US counterparts. Worse still, they are less likely to accept that their drinking is at problem levels (Leavy & Alexander, 1992).

## How psychology can reduce student drinking?

The main way psychology can contribute is by an understanding of the context in which most UK students' consumption takes place, and how this interacts with behaviour. We know from more than 500 psychological studies that an individual's consumption is partly a function of what they expect to happen to them when they drink. Positive alcohol consumption outcome expectancies have been extensively measured in areas of expected sexual enhancement, sociability, assertiveness, power feelings and relaxation and their role in promoting consumption has been shown (e.g. Goldman, 1999). Negative alcohol consumption outcome expectancies have also been measured, and their inhibitory effects on consumption have been explored (see Adams & McNeil, 1990; Jones & McMahon, 1994; Jones, in press). Negative expected outcomes include becoming belligerent or fighting, needing to scam money to stay in the round or to get home, and feeling ill.

The development of these long-term memory structures called expectancies is a function of the environment in which alcohol consumption occurs. From the initial work of Bandura a whole area of psychological science has developed within which the importance of both direct learning (through one's own drinking activities) and modelling (through observing others' drinking activities) has been revealed. Since negative expectancies of consumption derive from learning about negative outcomes of consumption, anything that reduces the impact of negative outcomes will reduce the learning that promotes the growth of negative expectancies. This is the case whether the negative outcomes are the result of one's own or others' drinking activities. In turn, the inhibitory effect on consumption that the expectancies otherwise might have had is dimmed.

So what is it about the usual student consumption environment that reduces the impact of negative outcomes and, therefore, the development of negative expectancies and their inhibitory effect? And how can an understanding of these environmental effects on outcome expectancies be used to reduce problem drinking? I now turn to some examples of how universities could avoid the 'buffering' of negative outcomes of consumption.

**Don't make it too cheap** For most drinkers on a budget, financial drain would be a negative outcome expectancy. But prices are very heavily discounted in student bars (low overheads, drinks industry promotions, etc.) with additional incentives (All you can drink for £10! Every fifth one free! Women drink free tonight!). In competition, adjacent public bars reduce prices for student cards, extend happy hours (four to five hours, not the traditional one hour) and offer pub incentive schemes (student loyalty cards with reduced prices for daily drinking and daily off-sale use). Promotion such as this surely contributes to excessive drinking.

**Discourage weekday consumption**
Among many peer groups, people expect drinking during the week (or, at least, drinking during the week at weekend levels) to be frowned upon. University bars traditionally have maximum business on weekend nights. But lately, midweek nights (particularly Thursday) have been heavily promoted and discounted and are becoming full, with no loss of weekend business. These same efforts are now being extended to Wednesdays and Tuesdays with the effect that there will be a risk of fewer individual-student alcohol-free days and an increase in consumption-frequency norms.

**Encourage an understanding of 'normal' consumption levels** Peer-group members consistently overestimate what other members drink. Through this calibration confusion, personal consumption norms and limits are set higher than they would otherwise be. This is especially true when there is little experience of consumption outside the peer group, as is the case of most students (Schroeder & Prentice, 1998) but not with other young adults who frequent public rather than private (e.g. student union) bars. There is abundant evidence that misperceptions over how much others drink are both profound and malleable (Perkins, 2002). Indeed, as Perkins observes, this is one of the few health-related areas in which the simple provision of normative information (posters, flyers, etc.) has an effect on perceptions and subsequent consumption style.

**Counter the climate of approval**
A much smaller range and number of disapproving agents are found in student bars because they host a single age-occupation peer-group. Drunkenness is tolerated more than elsewhere, where the public's disapproval through overtly signalled attitude is consistently higher.

**Tighten up on admission and service policies** Another negative outcome expectancy for many drinkers is being refused service or being thrown out of the pub. In many public bars, server-training and door-minding programmes are routinely used to reduce drunkenness in order to protect licenses. But student bars are less public and their licenses are much less at risk through public complaint. For this reason there is less need to have sanctions for drunken behaviour, but enforcing such sanctions could well reduce binge drinking.

Such interventions will not be easy. Most

**WEBLINKS**

Journal of American College Health: *www.heldref.org/html/body_jach.html*
ETOH, a searchable database of abstracts on alcohol consumption: *etoh.niaaa.nih.gov/*
Changing the Culture of College Drinking: *www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/*
Had Enough on Your Campus: *www.cspinet.org/booze/hadenough/home/index.html*

students have a recently developed (late teen and on) drive for sexual engagement, the peer group at play is at its most dense in student bars, and alcohol consumption counteracts reserve. This cocktail of factors ensures that bars will be regularly visited, alcohol will be regularly consumed and, through the buffering of negative consequences described, disproportionate alcohol-related harmful learning and harm itself will be regularly enabled.

## The glass remains half empty

Surprisingly, there is a lack of good data on UK student alcohol consumption: just a few studies reporting on medical/dental students, simply revealing that many drink above the government guidelines. There is no need for this absence – remote self-reporting of daily alcohol consumption by students on carefully structured data-gathering programmes that use internet and desktop computer technology, for example, can be readily implemented. The technologies of retrospective self-report, in general, have been shown to be both reliable and valid (e.g. Hoppe *et al*., 2000; Morrison *et al*., 1999; Sobell & Sobell, 1992). Good consumption data will allow the moderating effect of individual differences and institutional differences (e.g. civic/out-of-town, old/new, campus/distributed) to be explored.

Psychologists also need to gather more evidence concerning the associative and causal links with academic progress. A sole UK study reports a link between excessive consumption and poor academic outcomes in females (Hannay, 1998), but clearly much more research is needed. And how does drinking relate to student dropout? Rates in some higher education institutions HEIs) in the UK are as high as 25 per cent, and there are few where they are only in single figures. Few HEIs can satisfactorily ride the financial loss this brings (it needs to be absorbed into running activities, diluting the provision for those who remain), and few who drop out generate better opportunities than they would otherwise have had. Academic failure appears to be one of the predominant reason for dropout; generally through students engaging in parallel activities incompatible with effective study. The part played by alcohol in such activities needs investigation.

## Time, please, ladies and gentlemen

Psychologists in the UK should act quickly. During the last 10 years, the US response to fixing alcohol problems found on the campus has been significant. It has included several millions of federal dollars (through the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, one of the US National Institutes of Health), a journal dedicated to undergraduate health and well-being (*Journal of American College Health*), special issues of a leading international alcohol research journal (*Journal of Studies on Alcohol*), a federally funded task force on college consumption and several websites that make details of undergraduate alcohol problems more accessible (see weblinks). In the UK even basic information on alcohol consumption is missing, which makes it difficult to evaluate the structure and process of the role that campus consumption culture might play in academic success and failure.

With a government goal of 50 per cent of school leavers entering higher education within the next 10 years (it is already 50 per cent in Scotland), which generates the largest single homogeneous group of UK residents, the informed development and implementation of coherent alcohol policies (that go beyond the current bland statements) ought to be a priority. Psychology provides frameworks within which core information can be sought and understood and, where necessary, policy makers can be pressured. It's time for psychologists of several different persuasions to join the party – not just social, clinical and health but also those interested in how drinking decisions are triggered through associative memory and selective attention and why some individuals might be more or less responsive to alcohol than others.

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# Homesick blues

JANINA STRUK / REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

**HAZEL WILLIS, MARGARET STROEBE** *and* **MILES HEWSTONE** *with research and recommendations in the field of homesickness among students.*

HOMESICKNESS is a puzzling phenomenon. Take the case of one of us who recently had close contact with two students in their first few days at university. One of these students came from Eastern Europe, had travelled for many long hours overland to reach a completely unknown country, and had, as yet, limited skills in English and no possibility of returning home – possibly not even during the Christmas vacation. From the beginning she was quietly curious about her new environment, made friends quickly and went on to perform outstandingly well academically. The second was a local student, who had relocated to campus from just a few kilometres away. The contrast with the first student could not have been more striking: she was pale, miserable, and maladjusted to campus life, despite the fact that she could potentially visit home every weekend. Her spare time was spent phoning home rather than mingling with her fellow students, and she found concentrating in class well-nigh impossible. She actually had to return home to live when her homesickness became unbearable.

Anything from 30 to 80 per cent of UK students suffer from homesickness during their first year at university (see Brewin *et al.*, 1989; Fisher & Hood, 1987, 1988; Stroebe *et al.*, 2002). Although one may be tempted to dismiss this as low-level homesickness, its effects are far-reaching. Homesickness has negative effects on both health and academic performance. Furthermore, whilst lay opinion may regard homesickness as a passing phase of the early days at university, research shows that it can occur or recur at almost any point during the academic year. Most critically, for a small minority of students, homesickness never goes away.

## Distinguishing homesickness from similar conditions

What precisely is homesickness? It has been defined as 'a state of distress characterised by adjustment difficulties and intense longing for home and ruminations about home after having left home' (van Vliet, 2001, pp.14–15). Homesickness is related to – but is in some respects distinct from – phenomena such as separation anxiety, depression, nostalgia, loneliness, adjustment disorder, acculturation stress and grief. For example, an important distinction between homesickness and separation anxiety (which is a clinical disorder) is that homesickness subsides once the individual returns home, whereas those who suffer separation anxiety remain anxious after returning (van Vliet, 2001).

Interestingly, in conceptualising homesickness, researchers have included not only the missing of significant persons, but a variety of additional phenomena relating to the home environment, for example, missing smells or sounds, familiar foods or daily routines, or waking up in one's own bed. Furthermore, homesickness questionnaires have typically included items assessing (mal)adaptation to the new environment, for example 'Having difficulties taking on new challenges' or 'Dislike of current (work) activities' (van Tilburg *et al.*, 1997; van Vliet, 2001). This type of questionnaire research has identified five factors: missing family, loneliness, missing friends, adjustment difficulties, and ruminations about home (van Vliet, 2001).

## Why homesickness should be taken seriously

What evidence do we have that homesickness should be taken seriously by those who serve caregiving functions for students? Researchers have identified specific effects and have begun to unravel why some students are prone to suffer from homesickness while others are not. For example, homesickness can lead to depression and anxiety (Burt, 1993; Stroebe *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, it affects academic performance in a number of ways: cognitive failures, poor concentration, handing in work late, and decrements in work quality (Burt, 1993). Some students who suffer extremely from homesickness may simply go home without explanation, or the depression may lead to more negative consequences, including (in rare, but well publicised, cases) suicide (e.g. 'Suicide: Student nurse who hanged herself was homesick', 2000).

## Who is vulnerable?

Research has identified several personal and situational characteristics predisposing students to homesickness. Both males and females suffer from it. There is, however, a disparity in ways of coping: homesick female students seek more social support than do their male counterparts (e.g. Brewin *et al.*, 1989). Dependent (e.g. Carden & Feicht, 1991) and introverted, depressed or obsessive individuals (Fisher, 1989) are more likely to succumb to homesickness. It is associated with emotional instability (Stroebe *et al.*, 2002) and lower self-esteem, rigidity, negativism and lower levels of dominance (Eurelings-Bontekoe *et al.*, 1994).

While all the above point to fragile personality constellations, situational factors may be important too. For example, greater geographic distance from home is related to more frequent occurrence of homesickness among students (Fisher *et al.*, 1985). But as our opening example suggested, this variable is far from being generally predictive even among students. The fact that geographic distance plays little part in determining homesickness among boarding school children (who have less freedom to visit home) suggests that accessibility underlies this relationship of distance and homesickness (cf. Stroebe *et al.*, 2002).

## Attachment style and coping

How can we explain the patterns of individual differences in coping with the transition to university? Attachment theory offers a starting point through its investigation of interpersonal loss experiences. It enables us to understand how students are attached to those they left behind, and to examine the nature of their ongoing bond with their home (e.g. Bowlby, 1980). According to attachment theory, the type of bonding to a primary caregiver guides the establishment and maintenance of future emotional bonds (Ainsworth, 1979). Theorists have distinguished secure from insecure (ambivalent; avoidant; disorganised/ disoriented) styles of attachment. These styles are related to different patterns of trust in both self and others, and in judging the self and others as worthy of love and attention. Generally, it can be said that anxieties associated with separation from the attachment figure are higher among insecure than among secure persons.

How should these styles affect homesickness? On the one hand, in terms of deficits, it could be argued that it is worse for secure individuals to leave home, because they have been surrounded by love and positive appraisal at home, whereas insecure individuals have experienced generally unsatisfactory relationships. There is a lot to miss for the former, less for the latter. But attachment theory makes the opposite prediction: Insecure individuals will have more trouble separating from their attachment figures. Research has supported the attachment rather than the deficit explanation – there is some evidence that adjustment is more easily accomplished by students who are less dependent and more securely attached (Brewin *et al.*, 1989; Stroebe *et al.*, 2002).

**'We suggested conceptualising homesickness as a "mini-grief"…'**

We have noted that conceptualisations of homesickness include adjustment problems. It is evident that intake students are faced with unfamiliar and demanding environments. Daily hassles – ranging from dealing with financial problems, to finding out how the university system works, to worries about intellectual competence and social integration – can cause adjustment difficulties (Lazarus, 1984). While these aspects are more difficult to integrate within attachment theory, they can be incorporated, along with attachment theory predictions, in the dual process model (DPM: Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The DPM was developed to understand processes of coming to terms with bereavement. We suggested conceptualising homesickness as a 'mini-grief' similar to the grieving process (Stroebe *et al*., 2002). Coping with loss entails oscillation between coming to terms with separation and adapting to the new environment. Oscillation is essential for adjustment. Stroebe *et al.* (2003) related these processes to attachment styles, arguing that secure attachment is associated with easier oscillation and better adjustment over time than insecure attachment patterns.

## How to help the homesick

What can we recommend to help students suffering from homesickness? There is no easy cure for this sort of upset. Nevertheless, some suggestions derive from contemporary approaches to dealing with stressful life events. Pennebaker and colleagues demonstrated that open acknowledgement (particularly through diary writing) is useful for coping with stressful life events (reviewed in Pennebaker & Keough, 1999). Heightened periods of social interaction are also associated with lower rates of illness. Written disclosure by new students is associated with positive health outcomes including promotion of immune function and improvement in grades.

Pennebaker admits that such disclosure does not help all, and this is important here. We have argued elsewhere that the disclosure manipulation is likely to be particularly effective among insecurely attached individuals (Stroebe *et al.*, 2003). Following such reasoning, different types of disclosure intervention would be useful for insecure, homesick students. We suggest that these students should be targeted for oral or written disclosure intervention (non-homesick students will disclose effectively within their informal support networks).

How could such intervention be effective for these students? Disclosure provides avenues for (re)structuring stressful experiences. It allows assimilation

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**Social interaction is also associated with lower rates of illness**

of events into the self-concept and allows cognitive resources, previously used for inhibition, to tackle the changed environment (see Pennebaker & Keough, 1999). As noted above, insecure homesick students have trouble with their self and other representations. Drawing these lines of argument together: one would expect their self concept to be changed for the better through disclosure.

Despite support from different research areas, these ideas are speculative. We need more research with student populations. Thus, any new intervention programme must incorporate a controlled design and assessment of effectiveness.

## Time to acknowledge the problem

Homesickness has not, as yet, been recognised as an emotional syndrome in its own right. The symptoms that characterise homesickness are often recognised as isolated symptoms and are sometimes seen as a byproduct of dysphoria or depression. The acknowledgement of homesickness as a syndrome and definitive evidence of the causal direction from homesickness to depression (Stroebe *et al*., 2002) could inform the ways that students are monitored and also lead to an awareness of when, and for whom, risk is high. In addition, all those involved with student welfare (from personal tutors to student counsellors) need to acknowledge that homesickness is, statistically, a very normal (indeed frequent) occurrence. In a recent web search with the keyword ‘homesickness’, using a reliable search engine, it was found that a number of UK university counselling services acknowledged homesickness on their web pages. However, only one UK university had a reference to homesickness in their first-year handbook. An acknowledgement of homesickness, knowledge of vulnerability and a willingness to open avenues for disclosure will promote a more positive experience for freshers. It will also allow students to make the most of their all-too-brief time in Academe, and to ask for, and receive, help when they really need it.

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Love, money and studying

# You and your personality type at university

**Rowan Bayne** *on the real student survival guide.*

ONE of my students said that 'knowing your personality type is like having an owner's manual for yourself'. She was using 'personality type' in the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) sense. The MBTI questionnaire is the most widely used non-clinical measure of personality in the world. In this article I will illustrate the value of MBTI theory to psychology students in three areas: love and other relationships; money and debt; and studying, especially learning styles and feedback on essays.

First, a brief overview of MBTI theory. This overview allows you to choose your own type if you wish but please do this in a provisional way: 'Type clarification is detective work' (Carr, 1997, p.1). Generally, the best measure of personality type is a combination of MBTI results and exploring them with a skilled practitioner. *You* decide how accurate the results are, at your own pace. However, less formal methods of discovering your personality type work quite well (Bayne, in press-a, in press-b).

Please note too that here, as in much of psychology, terms are used in a technical sense. Do not relate to the words themselves, rather to what they mean in this theory. The theory can also be very useful without knowing your type, through suggesting non-obvious, non-standard approaches to, say, money or writing. However, if an approach works for you, it's a clue to your personality type.

The two central concepts in the theory are preference and type. Preference can be defined as 'feeling most natural and comfortable with a particular way of behaving and experiencing'. For example, someone with a preference for Introversion will, given normal type development and the opportunities, behave introvertedly most of the time and extravertedly some of the time. We can do both, but we prefer one.

Four pairs of preferences are suggested by the theory: Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I); Sensing (S) or Intuition (N); Thinking (T) or Feeling (F); and Judging (J) or Perceiving (P). The meaning of each preference is briefly indicated by the characteristics in Table 1, which are behaviours associated with the preferences, not definitions of them. All the characteristics are intended to be positive, to focus on strengths.

**'A theory of personality that says anyone can behave in any way is extremely weak'**

A person's type includes one from each pair of preferences e.g. ENTP. There are 16 such combinations and therefore 16 types (I.B. Myers, 1980). 'Type' is a dangerous word for MBTI theory because it may suggest a suffocating box and rigid categories. It may also have connotations of mysticism and charlatanism. However, as the idea of preference implies, 'type' in MBTI theory has a much more flexible meaning than such fears and rejections allow. It is not used in a pigeon-holing way, because each of us can become skilful in behaviours associated with the preferences opposite to our own.

A second danger is apparent here: such flexibility may reflect reality or it may be vacuous. A theory of personality that says anyone can behave in any way is extremely weak. Astrology (probably fairly) and psychodynamic theory (perhaps unfairly) have both been attacked on these grounds. MBTI theory is more subtle: it states that most people most of the time behave consistently with their types and thus can be understood and predicted to some extent. There are also several other levels of MBTI theory (K.D. Myers & Kirby, 1998; Bayne, 1995; in press-a), but in this article I will concentrate mainly on some of the preferences and pairs of preferences.

Some of the best evidence for the validity of MBTI theory comes from relationships between personality type

## WEBLINKS

There are hundreds of MBTI websites, which vary in quality. I recommend *www.personalitytype.com*; (brief profiles of each type with sections on observing, loving and parenting, communicating, and career choices); *www.typetalk.com*; and *www.capt.org*.

**TABLE 1 Characteristics associated with each preference**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| E | More outgoing and active | More reflective and reserved | I |
| S | More practical and interested in facts and details | More interested in possibilities and an overview | N |
| T | More logical and reasoned | More agreeable and appreciative | F |
| J | More planning and coming to conclusions | More easy-going and flexible | P |

and choice of career. There are good relationships with choice of subject at university too. For example, psychology students in the US and the UK tend strongly to prefer Intuition (N) to Sensing (S). The UK figures are approximately 70 per cent N for psychology students (Bayne, 1995) compared with 23 per cent N in the general population (Kendall, 1998).

This definitely does not mean that psychology students and staff who prefer Sensing are in the wrong discipline. On the contrary, they can enrich psychology because of their difference from the majority. If psychology had more Sensing students and staff, MBTI theory predicts that the discipline would be richer, and in particular more applied.

## Love and other relationships

A survey of 200 people who had dropped out of university found that loneliness was the most likely stated cause ('Lonely students quit', 2002). Relationships were reported to be crucial to staying and, associated with them, a sense of 'belonging'. Typical comments in the survey were: 'I was most worried first about making friends and second about the work' and 'It makes a hell of a difference if you like your tutor'.

Effective strategies to help students reduce loneliness will be partly organisational (e.g. help in developing social networks) and partly individual. The relevance of MBTI theory is first at a general level, because its main aim is to help people value difference more, rather than rejecting it as odd, weird or inferior. When the human tendency to reject people who are different from you is counteracted, it increases a sense of belonging. Second, MBTI theory suggests the most likely conflicts between people with different preferences (Table 2), and strategies for managing them (Table 3).

In their work on romantic relationships, Tieger and Barron-Tieger (2000) suggest strategies for each combination of types. For example, in ISTJ – ENFP couples, the ISTJs can try sharing their thoughts, feelings and reactions more (while still behaving like ISTJs most of the time), while ENFPs can try to be sensitive to their partners' routines. MBTI theory is thus more relevant to the efforts and compromises in romantic relationships than their mystery and passion. However, it's also similar to Lee's (e.g. 1988) ideas about styles of loving, most obviously in its equal valuing of very different styles, like Storge (friendly, companionable, affectionate love) and Eros (ideal beauty, immediate physical attraction, delight).

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**MBTI suggests that people of differing personalities can work together if they avoid the temptation to attempt to change each other to be more like themselves**

Feeling 'in tune' (a central part of love?) is more likely with someone of the same type, though other factors, like values and background, can be influential as well. However, couples of the same type can argue, fall out, and misunderstand each other. For example, INFPs tend to take things very personally, feel hurt and resentful, and keep quiet about it. To prevent such problems festering, INFP couples need to make a particular effort to speak about them.

In addition, the theory offers an explanation for strong initial attraction of opposites, when for example Js are attracted to Ps' easy-going flexibility, and Ps to Js' order: each person has what the other (relatively) lacks. They may then attempt to change each other to be more like themselves. MBTI theory predicts that these attempts will fail. Generally any combination of types can form a good relationship, but the more preferences a couple have in common, the more 'satisfied' (not a very romantic term) they tend to be with their relationship (Tieger & Barron-Tieger, 2000).

## Money and debts

Fear of debt is an increasingly worrying problem for many students. MBTI theory assumes that each type has a natural approach to money, derived from core motives. Knowing your own approach

**TABLE 2 Examples of potential problems between people with opposite preferences**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Between E and I** | need to talk vs. need to be alone |
| **Between S and N** | focus on details and realism vs. on general picture, links and speculation |
| **Between T and F** | being seen as unsympathetic and critical vs. as illogical and too agreeable |
| **Between J and P** | controlling and planning vs. flexible and very open to change |

**TABLE 3 Examples of strategies for managing and preventing problems between people with opposite preferences**

| | |
|---|---|
| **E with I** | allow time for privacy and to reflect |
| **I with E** | explain need for time alone, allow for other's need to talk in order to clarify |
| **S with N** | overall picture first, with relevant details later |
| **N with S** | say a particular idea is half-formed and include relevant detail |
| **T with F** | include effects on people, begin with points of agreement |
| **F with T** | include reasons and consequences, be brief |
| **J with P** | allow for some flexibility in plans, style of working, etc. and for the other's need not to be controlled |
| **P with J** | allow for some planning and structure and for the other's need to control and decide |

can help you to use it most effectively, probably by moderating it and supplementing it with aspects of other approaches. Taking a simple level of the theory, SPs (a combination of Sensing and Perceiving) tend to spend money to feel free and excited; SJs tend to be careful with money, to try to achieve security and stability; NTs try to spend it perfectly (competence is their core motive); and NFs tend to ignore it (because their core motive is rather more vague and not materialistic, i.e. 'self-actualisation').

In the theory each of the natural approaches is valid and has strengths (Linder, 2000). However, the strengths can be taken too far and they can be modified as part of type development. For example, an SP might achieve more excitement from other sources than spending money and, through developing their Judging 'side', might even save (a little). Similarly, NTs, especially INTPs, might set a time limit on their detailed comparative analyses of a particular purchase, and develop their ability to make decisions in a Feeling way to supplement (not replace or equal) their Thinking decisions.

## Learning styles and feedback on essays

Aspects of the learning styles associated with each preference are listed in Table 4 (cf. DiTiberio & Hammer, 1993; Lawrence, 1997). They vary dramatically. For example, brainstorming is as natural as breathing for some types, but pointless and threatening to others.

Similarly, a student's preferred learning style or styles will inevitably match the teaching styles of some tutors and clash with others. This causes most trouble and injustice when students or tutors are not aware of their own biases.

The biases can be very persistent. For example, Smith (1993) compared the comments on an essay of six lecturers with a preference for Thinking (T) and six with a preference for Feeling (F), all of whom were experienced teachers of English and INs (Introverted Intuitives). All the lecturers put comments in the margins of the essay and summarised strengths and weaknesses (or 'areas to develop') at the end. They all also agreed on the mark for the essay, wrote about the same amount of feedback and used similar numbers of questions and reactions. However, the differences were striking too, especially as the department had explicit guidelines on giving feedback on essays: the F lecturers praised the essay twice as much as the Ts and wrote twice as many suggestions.

Smith suggested that these striking differences illustrate different philosophies of teaching. The suggested T philosophy is that students do (or should) focus on weaknesses, on 'what is the problem that needs solving?' (p.40). The F philosophy is to encourage and to develop strengths first. An obvious practical question is the impact of the different styles of feedback on students generally, and on T and F students respectively. Smith found greater concern on the part of the F lecturers about students' feelings and greater emphasis on the part of the Ts on essay content and potential learning. Students' views on the two approaches to giving feedback haven't been studied yet.

Another example of a marked difference in approach to an aspect of studying is the reactions of people to deadlines. People with a preference for Judging (J) tend to start a piece of work early and, circumstances allowing, finish it well before the deadline. Their motives, according to the theory, are enjoyment of closure and avoiding what they experience as the stress of an imminent deadline. (About 10 per cent of Js are exceptions: Quenk *et al.*, 2001.) Conversely, people with a preference for Perceiving (P) tend to do their best work at the last minute; they like to keep things open and they enjoy an imminent deadline energy surge. (About 40 per cent of Ps are exceptions: Quenk *et al.*, 2001.) Js and Ps also produce equally good work, but in their contrasting styles and with characteristic strengths and weaknesses (Table 4).

As in the different approaches to spending money, type development can compensate for these weaknesses. For example, Js tend to be more skilled than Ps at writing conclusions to essays and lab reports, and Ps at integrating more diverse material, but just as Js can learn to return to a 'finished' essay and add another idea or more notes of caution, so Ps can learn to add a careful conclusion (Bayne, in press-b).

**TABLE 4 The preferences and aspects of learning style**

| | |
|---|---|
| **E** | action, talk, trial and error |
| **I** | reflection, work privately. |
| **S** | close observation of what actually happens; starts with the concrete and specific, ideas and theory later |
| **N** | theory first; links and possibilities; surges of interest. |
| **T** | analysis and logic; critiques |
| **F** | harmonious atmosphere; need to care about the topic |
| **J** | more formal; organised; clear expectations and criteria |
| **P** | flexible; not routine; bursts of energy; work as play |

## Conclusion

MBTI theory is a positive and constructive approach to people's remarkable diversity. Students of all the MBTI types can enjoy psychology and university and succeed in their own styles, but it helps if they know and value their personality type, and if others value it too.

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