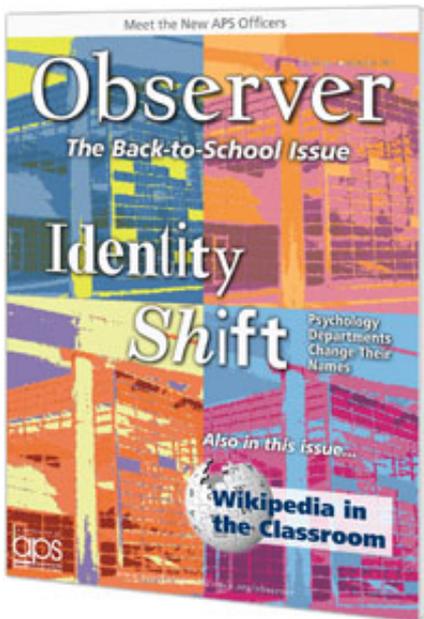


# Identity Shift

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In the late 1990s, the Department of Psychology at Dartmouth University became the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. Howard Hughes, who served as chair at the time, recalls the change as the result of a “little plot” he hatched with colleague (and APS Fellow) Todd Heatherton while sitting on a bench outside Silsby Hall, then the department’s home. The word *plot* connotes a sinister air the scene most certainly lacked; still, it fits with the spirit of a discussion whose aim was to overthrow an existing establishment. “We thought just ‘Department of Psychology’ was a little old-fashioned,” Hughes says. “We wanted a name that would give a little more luster.”<sup>X</sup>

The idea was that a new shine would help illuminate what research psychologists actually do. “We thought if we came up with a name change, it would help dispel people’s misconceptions of what this business is all about,” says Hughes. Sometimes this lack of understanding led people to question psychology’s scientific basis, as was the case with parents who refused to believe their child could major in psychology and also be pre-med. Other times the confusion came from mistaking psychology for psychiatry. When Hughes first met the woman who became his mother-in-law, she often asked his advice for handling her “nervous tendencies.”

“She would say, ‘Harold, you’re a psychiatrist. Why is it that ...’” Hughes recalls. “And my wife would say, ‘Mom, his name is Howard. And he’s a *psychologist*.’”

The Department of Psychology name also failed to indicate where research was heading in the future. At Dartmouth of a decade ago, as at a number of universities, many faculty were tending toward the study of brain sciences, with the use of neuroimaging already shifting from promise into practice. The department started a neuroscience major while Hughes was chair, and it has since developed a PhD track in cognitive neuroscience. “We thought it was a more accurate reflection of our aspirations, and of what

we were actually becoming,” says Hughes of the new name. The rest of the department concurred with the change, and in May of 1999 the change to Psychological and Brain Sciences was approved.

Plots of the sort hatched by Hughes and Heatherton are not entirely new — Purdue’s department became Psychological Sciences in the early 1970s to make it clear “that we were a science, not an art,” says current chair, Christopher Agnew — but lately they appear to be increasing in number. Indiana now has its own Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. Northern Kentucky and Missouri have Departments of Psychological Science and Psychological Sciences, respectively. A recent merger at Duke led to the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, and an even more recent one, at Brown, created the Department of Cognitive, Linguistic and Psychological Sciences.

Discussions with chairs and long-standing faculty at these departments confirm that the name changes represent something much closer to a rational movement than a mere coincidence. The exact reasons for changing vary by school, but broadly speaking they split into the two basic camps — by no means mutually exclusive — encompassed by Dartmouth’s decision. Some departments have chosen new names chiefly to enhance the perception of psychology as a science, whereas others have done so to reflect the ongoing integration of behavioral and brain research. All of them recognize that the name *Department of Psychology* presents an inadequate picture of what goes on in many programs.

### **Psychology’s Image Problem**

Misconceptions of what and how psychologists conduct research date back to the very early years of psychological study. In the early 20th century, Joseph Jastrow of the University of Wisconsin said the public saw psychology labs as places to research “mental healing, or telepathic mysteries, or spiritualistic performances.” The perception shifted favorably after World War I, when psychologists were recognized for their contributions to the selection of servicemen and for their clinical efforts in treating shell-shocked soldiers. But psychology failed to graduate from a “little science” to a “big science” at this time, in part because the field offered few practical solutions to the problems of the Great Depression. Outlining this history in a 1986 article for the *American Psychologist* — appropriately titled “Why Don’t They Understand Us?” — APS Fellow Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr. of Texas A&M feared that the “longevity of psychology’s image problem might suggest that it is insoluble.”

After World War II, psychologists began to study the public perception of their discipline for themselves. Results of the first such survey, conducted by Lester Guest, were published in 1948. From one set of questions, Guest found that 55 percent of people felt psychologists “should be called scientists” — a figure far above that of economists (roughly 27 percent), but also well below that of chemists (roughly 92 percent). Through a second set, Guest discovered a widespread belief that psychologists dealt primarily with abnormal behavior, which led him to conclude that people likely “make little or no distinction between psychologists and psychiatrists.” A third questionnaire produced this gem of misperception: About a quarter of respondents believed psychologists could read people’s minds.

In a 1986 review of similar research done since Guest’s survey, Benjamin, with colleagues Wendy Wood and Melinda Jones, concluded that the general understanding of psychological research had improved in some ways but remained compromised in others. That finding was underscored by the results of a new survey performed by the three researchers. On one hand, about 84 percent of people

agreed that psychology is a science. On the other hand, the idea of psychology as common sense persisted just as strongly; 83 percent of people believed that everyday life provided some psychological training. As a result, more than half of the respondents felt that psychology made no difference in their lives. “In short,” the researchers wrote in the *American Psychologist*, “the public does not appear to have the understanding of psychologists’ activities and their potential impact that most psychologists would desire.”

The perception problem is not limited to the United States. A recent study led by Brenda Morales and Charles Abramson of Oklahoma State University, published in *Psychological Reports*, found that nearly three quarters of undergraduate students in Brazil agreed that psychological research is scientific, but only two in five agreed that such research was “necessary,” and only a quarter felt counselors should be concerned with research findings. On the other side of the globe, the story remains the same. In a recent issue of the *Australian Psychologist*, Steve Hartwig and Catherine Delin report that psychologists were rated as the country’s least-needed professionals from a group that included nurses, general practitioners, teachers, lawyers, and psychiatrists.

As recently as 1998, about the time Dartmouth hatched its name plot, the century-old image problem remained robust. That year a team of researchers led by Louis Janda of Old Dominion University published results of two public perception surveys in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* that compared psychology to biology, chemistry, economics, medicine, physics, and sociology. In the first survey, directed at the general public, Janda and his collaborators found that psychology ranked last on a question of importance and finished above only economics and sociology on a perceived gap between experts and lay people. Of the 27 spontaneous comments elicited by this survey, 25 were about psychology, and all but one were negative — with most critics implying that people should trust common sense above psychological findings. The results of the second survey, directed at Old Dominion faculty, were even less favorable. On both the question of a discipline’s importance and of its lay-expert gap, psychology ranked dead last.

### **What the Field Is Really All About**

Perilou Goddard feels the pain of Old Dominion from the campus of Northern Kentucky. At the university’s Center for Integrative Natural Science and Mathematics, a program that encourages the teaching, learning, and outreach of various scientific disciplines ranging from chemistry to geology, psychology is explicitly not

included. Part of the problem, says Goddard, is that many Northern Kentucky faculty limit their definition of a science to disciplines that use laboratory apparatus. She notes one exception to the center’s general exclusion: a neuroscientist from the psychology department, who is accepted on the grounds that his research involves rats, neurons, chemicals, and the like.

“For a long time we’ve felt that our colleagues in the natural and physical sciences just don’t get that psychology is a science,” says Goddard, who was chair when the department at Northern Kentucky officially requested the name Psychological Science, in October 2008. “We got so tired of people talking about the sciences and not meaning us, we thought we should help them along by at least putting ‘science’ in the name of our department.”

The idea of explaining the department's scientific nature to other disciplines did play a role in the decision, says Jeffrey Smith, the current chair. Another consideration, Smith recalls, was highlighting the department's scientific core to prospective students. At a late-summer faculty retreat, members of the Northern Kentucky psychology department discussed these lingering misperceptions, as well as how best to address them. The idea of a new name was unanimously embraced, says Goddard, and once she learned how easy it would be to submit the official request ("all it took was a memo"), the department had no reason not to.

"We talked about it and said let's actually change the name to 'psychological science' to more directly indicate what the field is really all about, and particularly our approach to it," says Smith. "The name change was one way of communicating that to students, to colleagues, and to the general community the nature of psychology — the scientific basis behind the discipline."

The Department of Psychological Sciences at the University of Missouri was born of similar reasons, about a decade earlier. Harris Cooper had just become chair of the department when he decided its name did not adequately describe its nature. "Everyone in the department used the scientific method to study psychological phenomenon," he says. "I was really looking at internally who we were and how I was hoping we would be perceived externally."

Cooper believes the change emphasized the type of "rigorous empirical investigation" that psychology shares with the natural sciences. The new name reflected such a universal belief among the Missouri faculty that Cooper does not recall a single voice of opposition. "It was a change that was easy to defend," he says, "so I don't remember ever having to do so."

### **From Culture to Chemistry**

Cooper is now the chair of psychology at Duke, which underwent a name change of its own about five years ago. The new Department of Psychology and Neuroscience is the product of a marriage that occurred between one psychology department that covered social and health sciences and another that covered brain sciences. The departments were unified to facilitate collaboration across disciplines, and Duke now boasts five areas of psychological training: clinical, developmental, social, cognition and cognitive neuroscience, and systems and integrative neuroscience. "We refer to ourselves as studying behavior from culture to chemistry," Cooper says. "We truly do span everything from cultural approaches to understanding human thought, feelings, and behavior, to the chemistry of the same."

The blurring of traditional disciplinary lines was a major reason why Brown University formed the Department of Cognitive, Linguistic and Psychological Sciences out of two distinct departments, in July 2010. The new department will study "mind, brain, behavior, and language" from its freshly renovated 36,000-square-foot home. "Having separate departments of cognitive science and psychology no longer made sense given the multidisciplinary nature of our field," says William Heindel, the current chair. "The two departments have typically taken complementary approaches to common scientific questions, and it became clear that cutting-edge research on these problems required spanning several levels of analysis and using a range of approaches and methodologies."

The lack of a merger did not prevent the psychology department at Indiana University from assuming a new name in 2003: Psychological and Brain Sciences. The change acknowledged that "the spectrum of

psychology has broadened significantly” to include neural approaches and an integrated study of brain and cognition, says Olaf Sporns, Indiana’s associate department chair. Linda Smith, the head chair, agrees that the swift expansion of certain subfields — neuroscience, cellular science, and robotics, among them — threatened to destabilize the department as it used to exist. The name change reflected the faculty’s desire to capture these various advances in a single container. “We think behavior is the central lynchpin,” says Smith, “but we thought it was important we not be isolated from where advances were happening.”

Without question, the new department names at Duke and Brown and Indiana evolved differently from those at Missouri and Northern Kentucky. The former efforts lacked an explicit agenda of shifting public perception that emboldened the latter, and they ask psychology to share space on their new billboards with brain sciences. At the same time, it seems fair to consider the moves part of the same family — cousins, if not siblings, with what happened at Dartmouth as a common relative — in the sense that they all emerged to project an enlightened image of the discipline. Each move indicates a belief that psychology deserves to stand among the harder sciences on the merit of its basic methodology, its integration with the brain sciences, or both. The field is not, after all, witnessing a counter-movement filled with Departments of Psychology and Spiritualistic Performances.

“I think it helped us to project what the department is more effectively to the outside world,” says Sporns of Indiana’s new name. “We’re not the only ones who have done this, and I suspect we won’t be the only ones doing this in the future.”

### **The ‘Prestige’ of Psychology**

Confirmation of Sporns’s suspicion may depend largely on the success of the name changes that have already occurred. Some early signs appear positive. David Geary of Missouri saw first hand the result of simply adding the word *sciences* to the psychology department’s name. “There was some internal attempt to be included among other departments in the biological and natural sciences, in terms of how it’s viewed by people on campus, administrators, so forth,” Geary says of the decision to become the Department of Psychological Sciences. “When I was chair, which was a few years after the change was instituted, I did notice that when administrators gave talks, overviews of research of what the university was doing, we were increasingly presented with these other natural science departments.”

Lambert Deckers, who has taught at Ball State’s Psychological Science Department for 42 years, believes psychology’s convergence with neuroscience, cognition, and brain studies will do even more to blur the lines of public perception. “I could see the integration with biological sciences as adding to the ‘prestige’ of psychology,” he says. “Brain science and biological science all have material bases that people can point to, that they can smell and touch it, but with mental events you can do none of those things.” (Ball State’s change is a bit of an outlier;

it was made in the late 1960s to distinguish experimental psychology from two other departments, counseling and educational psychology, that exist at the Teacher’s College.)

Richard Petty, department chair at Ohio State University, mentioned several of the new names during a recent talk on current trends in psychology given at a meeting of the Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology, but he is not sure names alone will be enough. “When I was an undergraduate, I was in a

department of foreign affairs,” he says. “Now they’re all called political science. Is political science more identified with science? I don’t know if that does it.” Petty is more interested in the new majors that have accompanied the new department names. At many schools, including Indiana, Duke, and Dartmouth, the traditional psychology major has been joined by a concentration in neuroscience. Missouri will soon add a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology — to go with the existing Bachelor of Arts — that will require additional courses in statistics and an area like biology, in the hopes of attracting more pre-med students. Northern Kentucky added its own Bachelor of Science concentration a few years ago, and Jeffrey Smith says it is now more popular than the B.A. degree.

Popularity is one thing, says Petty, but a better indication of the success or failure of these changes will be whether they attract students who would have otherwise studied outside the psychology department. By that barometer, the changes at Dartmouth are already giving a reading. The school created its neuroscience major while Hughes was chair, around the same time he was hatching the plot that would become the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences. Initially the department anticipated that about 10 students in each class would pursue the concentration in each class, says Hughes; instead that figure is closer to 40. Meanwhile, the number of traditional psychology majors has not slipped — leading Hughes to believe that many of these students, in former times, would have majored in biology.

“I don’t know if I’m kidding myself, but I think the general perception has changed. I think it has,” says Hughes. “I think it’s interesting to see how many departments have been going this way. My guess is it’s external validation of the fact it was a good idea, what we did.”