

# Subdisciplines in Their Interactions

September 01, 1999

Consider the following:

- Most psychologists read only journals in their sub-specialty of psychology;
- Psychologists are employed in many departments on university campuses, not just psychology departments;
- Most psychologists attend psychology meetings only in their subdiscipline and often attend meetings that are not of psychologists (neuroscience, decision and information science).

Are these strengths or weaknesses of our field? They can be viewed as strengths because psychology has relevance to any field that involves behavior, so we are useful in lots of different fields. But this can be a weakness if we don't bring this interaction with other fields back to the discipline of psychology itself.

Many of us older folk were educated believing in big theories and scientific explanations that would be applied throughout all of psychology. Neil Miller took learning theory and used it in clinical work. Social learning theory was crucial in developmental and social psychology. Now we are in the era of smaller, more localized theories, and research.

What happened? It is hard to say, but we can cite some factors that influenced the field.

Cognitive psychology led to a focus on human and not animal models, and cognitive, not social or affective factors. Research proceeded in these other areas, but on parallel, not integrated courses. Many believed animal work had no relevance any more. Computer searches were invented, leading young scholars to believe the world began in 1975 when most computer searches begin. Tenure and promotion became more difficult, and academic jobs became scarcer. Grants became more difficult to obtain, so faculty became focused on the behaviors that lead to success-publications and that hard-to-get grant. This narrowed the focus.

Picking too broad a topic means too much to read, too much work to do to produce a publication. In my own field of taste aversion, learning was popular in part and (only in part) because a taste aversion experiment can be completed in a few days. Journals proliferated and they became narrower and narrower, and more and more expensive. All these factors led to fractionation of the field. But now, things could very well be changing back. The Internet is free and journals are increasingly available on the net

And APS is here.

APS was created in part so that we could interact in one place. Many topics are common across

disciplines, and many problems are being worked on simultaneously in all fields of psychology. APS is a place to hear about this work, and to meet those who are doing it. Our journals, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* and *Psychological Science*, cross the borders of our subdisciplines, and have the very best work. *Summit* meetings organized by APS have brought together all the various sub-groups to meet in one place to discuss issues that are common to all psychologists.

Teaching is an area where breadth has survived better than in research. If you teach undergraduates, you need to have a broad perspective and know and present information outside your own field. For this reason the teaching of psychology has always been important to APS. *Current Directions* helps you learn what is going on outside your own field. The Teaching Institute that precedes the APS Convention does more to help in the teaching domain.

During the course of this year, I hope to continue APS's goal of bringing psychologists together, so that the power of our subdisciplines can be felt in their interaction. I am interested in ideas from APS members that will facilitate our work in this direction. I firmly believe psychology is one field, not many, and that there is strength in our diversity and relevance to other fields, strength that we could benefit from more by interacting with each other more, something we can do through APS.