

50 Years Since Intro Psych

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Note: This essay was prepared for the 50th Reunion of the Colgate University Class of 1970. It, in turn, is the precis of a long essay exploring developments in psychology over the last half-century, which I prepared when I taught the introductory psychology course at Berkeley for the last time, in 2017. The longer essay can be read at

https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jfkihlstrom/50_Years.html.

I always knew I was going to be a psychologist, at least from about age 12, but Colgate made me the psychologist I became. Bill Edmonston introduced me to hypnosis, which led to research on [consciousness and unconscious mental life](#); “Steve” Hartshorne introduced me to existentialism, which led to research on [social cognition](#), the faculty by which we understand ourselves, other people, and the world in which we interact. I applied for graduate study at Penn primarily because it housed a distinguished hypnosis laboratory, but on my application I also declared that I wanted to quantify the concepts of existentialist theories of personality: the faculty joked that they admitted me just to see what I looked like. Although I spent my entire career in major research universities -- Harvard, Wisconsin, Arizona, Yale, and Berkeley, I focused my teaching on undergraduate education – though my teaching style was closer to Edmonston’s stand-up lectures than Hartshorne’s version of the Socratic method.

That included the [introductory psychology course](#), now usually handed off to adjuncts and other untenured, contingent faculty. For their last essay, I asked my students to write about something they learned during the course that surprised or especially intrigued them. In 2017, when I taught the course for the last time before

retiring, I turned the tables and wrote about the changes I had witnessed in psychology in the 50 years since I myself had taken intro (at Colgate, then, freshmen could not register for the course).

The short version is that *everything* has changed. Psychology, once the sole “science of mental life”, has been joined by cognitive science and cognitive (and affective) neuroscience. A discipline once dominated by radical behaviorism underwent a “cognitive revolution” that refocused its attention on the internal mental structures and processes that underlie experience, thought, and action. A course once heavily based on animal behavior is now based on human cognition and emotion.

In 1967, the brain was mostly undifferentiated “association cortex”; now it is a “Swiss Army knife” of domain-specific modules and coordinated systems of modules. Learning was the formation of stimulus-response associations; now it is the acquisition of knowledge that enables us to predict and control events. Sensation was a matter of stimulus intensity exceeding a threshold; now signal-detection theory takes into account the expectations and motives of the observer. Perception focused almost exclusively on vision; now taste, smell, and touch, not to mention speech and music, are part of the curriculum. Memory was the rote learning of nonsense syllables; now we distinguish among various types of memory, each with different properties, and have a detailed understanding of the processes by which memories are encoded, stored, and retrieved. Thinking once focused on deliberate, infallible syllogistic reasoning; now the focus is on automatic, heuristic “shortcuts” that can lead to judgmental errors. Intelligence was defined strictly in terms of IQ; now we recognize multiple forms of intelligence, including social and emotional intelligence, which may be largely independent of each other.

Motivation was focused on hunger and thirst; now we have gone beyond homeostasis to understand social motives, and why people engage in behaviors without the promise or prospect of reward. The psychology of emotion was the psychology of fear; now we have a more differentiated view of emotional life, including a wide variety of positive emotions.

Personality was Freudian psychoanalysis, and social psychology emphasized situational influences on attitudes and behavior; now we understand the individual's experience, thought, and action as emerging from a bidirectional dynamic system in which people shape the situations that, in turn, shape them. Rather paradoxically, research on behavior genetics reveals the strong influence of the "unshared environment" on making each of us the unique individuals that we are. Development was mostly a matter of biological maturation; now we view children as naïve scientists actively testing and revising theories concerning the world around them.

Like personality, mental illness and its treatment were mostly understood in Freudian terms; now we have a rich diagnostic system that provides a reliable basis for both psychological and biological research on the nature and causes of mental illness. Although we are little closer to understanding the biochemistry of mental illness than we were 50 years ago, at least we have a battery of "cognitive-behavioral" treatments, emphasizing the "here and now" instead of the "there and then", that actually work.

In 1967, the practical applications of scientific psychology were pretty much confined to education, and those were pretty much confined to intelligence testing; psychological research has now shown us the right way to teach children to read and calculate, and how to motivate students to tackle difficult subject-matter. In healthcare,

the pharmaceutical industry invents new drugs all the time, but they can't invent a pill to get people to take their pills: that's a job for psychology, and we know how to do it.

Organizational behavior, once a niche topic in social psychology, is now a huge (and lucrative) area in every business school. Those judgment heuristics, discovered by psychologists, revolutionized economic theory and are now used to "nudge" us into making better choices in our own self-interest, without compromising human freedom.

Writing that left me breathless. As I said, everything's changed. We have a completely different understanding of mind, brain, and behavior than we did 50 years ago. Classmates who are interested can read the whole essay, which runs to more than 50 pages, on my website at

https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jfkilstrom/50_Years.html.