# Eight Things Wrong with Introductory Psychology Courses in America: A Warning to My European Colleagues

ERIC P. CHARLES

**Zusammenfassung**

*8 Probleme mit Psychologie-Einführungskursen in Amerika: Eine Warnung an meine europäischen KollegInnen*

Einführung in die Psychologie ist der erste zu belegende Kurs für PsychologiestudentInnen an amerikanischen Universitäten, oft auch der einzige, den die meisten anderen Studierenden im Fach Psychologie absolvieren. In ihm ergeben sich Probleme sowohl durch widersprüchliche curriculare Zielvorstellungen als auch durch schlechte Lehrbücher. Institutionelle Zwänge an den Universitäten, die Marktinteressen der Verlage sowie eine weit verbreitete Selbstgefälligkeit verfestigen die Problemlage. Wenn die europäischen PsychologInnen nicht aufpassen, wird der Druck, mit amerikanischen Universitäten mithalten zu können, zu den gleichen Problemen führen.

**Schüsselwörter:** *Lehre in Psychologie, Lehrbücher, Curriculum, Einführung in die Psychologie, Kritisches Denken*

**Summary**

Introductory Psychology is the first course that must be taken by any students interested in studying psychology in an American university. It is also the only psychology class taken by most other students. The class has problems both resulting from conflicting class goals and poorly designed textbooks. Further, institu-

tional forces within the university, market forces within the publishing industry, and general complacency within the field conspire to entrench these problems. If European psychologists are not vigilant, the pressure to emulate the American university system will results in the same problems.

**Keywords:** *Teaching Psychology, Textbooks, Pedagogy, Introductory Psychology, Critical Thinking*

## Introduction

The only formal interaction most people in America have with the discipline of psychology is through Introductory Psychology, »Psych 101«, the most commonly taken class at most universities throughout the country. Despite its popularity, this class is one of the most neglected conceptually. There is little scrutiny of the content and format of the class, or the consequences of that style and content. Instead of being determined by pedagogical function, the structure of the class is dictated by market forces dominated by large publishing houses, mass use of lecturers (instructors without job security, often paid very little and considered easily replaceable), and teaching to the lowest common denominator. These forces have led to a standardized class that has bad consequences for students, psychology faculty, and the profession as a whole. While I cannot speak to the way such classes are handled on the other side of the water, I understand that there is considerable pressure to emulate the American academic model at every level, and so I believe that some insight into the problems of this ubiquitous aspect of American psychology might be of help.

Most American Universities aim to give students a general »liberal arts« education, as well as a specialization in some specific area, referred to as their »major«. Many students enter college with little idea what they want to study. At some point in their first two years these students formally declare a major, and then must fulfill the course requirements for that specific degree. Before this, they are referred to as »undeclared« and focus on taking courses that fulfilling breadth-of-knowledge requirements as well as courses in areas they are considering for a major. If at some point students realize they will not be able to complete their major, they may switch to a different major and attempt to fulfill those requirements. Many disciplines typically offer separate courses to serve as 1) the

first course taken by majors and 2) the simplified course offered to expose non-majors to the field, in other disciplines the two functions are typically served by the same course. Psychology departments are of the latter type; the single course, Introductory Psychology, gives a very broad survey of all areas studied by psychologists. By taking students through a large textbook, it is intended to serve as the starting point for majors and to inform non-majors about the field. In general then, the textbooks dictate the course. In practice, the instructor usually serves to a) select parts of the textbook to include or skip; b) walk students through the textbook in case they didn't read or didn't understand; c) supplement the material with anecdotes of further work the instructor finds particularly engaging.

As a general framework, I will assume that the intended functions of Introductory Psychology are similar to the functions of introductory classes in other disciplines. In that case, the two primary functions are: 1) For those who will specialize in psychology, this class begins their transition from »interested in psychology« to »capable of thinking about psychology at a professional and scientific level«. To accomplish this, the class should expose them to new ways of thinking, and provide a knowledge base they can use in later classes. 2) For those who will not specialize in psychology, this class serves as the public face of the department and the profession. That is, the class should demonstrate that psychology *has* a foundation and that its subject matter *can* be studied systematically. In either case: by »foundation« I refer to the corpus of empirical findings created by over 100 years of psychological research, and the theoretical work that both led to those findings and resulted from them; by »systematic study« I mean that questions about psychological phenomenon can be answered through some method of formal investigation (again both theoretically and empirically), i.e, that such questions need not be relegated to the realm of intuition, or casual discussion.[1] Unfortunately, the class typically fails in those goals. Instead, I assert, the typical American Introductory Psychology class leaves students with little sense of the foundation of the field, and an unimproved understanding of how to study psychological phenomenon.

This failure results from many factors that I suspect are, or until recently were, limited to American institutions. These problems may be easier to avoid than to solve post-hoc, as political factors have conspired to entrench them in the American system. When overseas institutions attempt to emulate the American

system, they risk getting into the same predicament: There will be increased pressure to teach the course in the American style, using American-style textbooks, and evaluating students in the American way. I will discuss the factors that keep the poor structure in place, try my best to lay out some of the problems as I see them, and to suggest alternative approaches. As the factors discussed below are present throughout the American system, it should be clear that most teachers do not see these things as flaws at all. Their feeling of correctness is reinforced by professional and entrepreneurial forces. As such, while this paper openly serves as a warning, it is also covertly serves as a personal manifesto for the way Introductory Psychology should be taught. I have somewhat artificially divided the problems into two types, problems arising from confused class goals, and problems arising from poor textbooks structure.

## Problems Arising from Class Goals

Many psychologists in America complain that our field is not considered a »true science«, and the primary stated goal of most Introductory Psychology teachers and most Introductory Psychology textbook authors is to convey the scientificness of the field. As such, you would expect Introductory Psychology to look very much like the introductory classes in other sciences – biology, chemistry, physics, geology, etc. – that focus on teaching students things that scientists know, things that were discovered years ago, things that are not really questionable by introductory students. That is, you would expect Introductory Psychology teachers to use well-established results to teach basic principles of the field in a simplified way. However, Introductory Psychology classes also have many secondary goals, the net effect of which are to encourage students to view our field as unscientific, unfocused, and lacking any foundation.[2] Course syllabi, remarks by teachers, and prefaces to the textbooks will tell you that the goals of Introductory Psychology include: 1) making the subject matter accessible, 2) teaching critical thinking skills, 3) keeping up to date on cutting edge results, 4) exposing students to current debates in the field, and 5) focusing on psychological science. Problem 1 – Making the Subject Matter (too) Accessible

Of course instructors of introductory classes should strive to deliver material in an understandable way, however in many classes understandability is emphasized at the expense of accurately portraying the material. If psychology is a subject

worth studying, that is because systematic study of peoples' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reveals new ways of thinking about psychical phenomenon. That is, presumably we study psychology because that study will alter, enhance, or multiply our perspectives; it will leave us different than we were when we began our studies. Unfortunately, most Introductory Psychology classes encourage students to think the world is more or less as it already seemed to them. This is because the primary method used to increase understandability is appeal to folk psychology. That is, they use examples of research in which psychologists investigated whether or not some folk idiom was correct (e.g., Do 'birds of a feather flock together', do 'nice guys finish last') Folk psychology is a completely valid thing to study, just as folk physics and folk biology are. However, students should be encouraged from the very start of their Introductory Psychology class to be ready to set aside their folk beliefs (for the purposes of class) and attempt to understand the perspectives used by professional psychologists. *Rather than striving to make the subject matter fit easily into the student's preconceptions, students should be continuously challenged to approach the psychological questions in new and initially unintuitive ways.* Problem 2 – Critical Thinking

In the past 15-20 years, the most important buzz words in American schools, from kindergardens to graduate schools, have been »critical thinking«. When it comes up, it is either from a stance of attack (You are not teaching students enough critical thinking skills!), or a stance of pride (We emphasize critical thinking in all our classes!). The need to teaching these skills is felt strongly, and the attitude accompanying it is definitely one of a teacher-student relationship. It is assumed that the teachers can do it, but that most students cannot, and that the best means to get students to do it is through explicit instruction of some type. This burden is not felt equally by professors in all disciplines; often such rhetoric is strongest in the social sciences. As a result, teaching »critical thinking« is a declared goal of most Introductory Psychology professors. Alas, the goal of teaching critical thinking is inherently flawed; the teacher-student attitude does not create an environment that supports critical thinking; instead, it creates an environment in which the task is to reflect the teacher's critique of the issues, which itself can not be criticized.

Further, the general conceptualization is flawed. Presumably we strive to teach critical thinking to students so that they can gain something via critical

thinking. If that is the case, »critical thinking« in the abstract is of no value, what is of value is the ability to think critically *about* particular things. Alas, thinking critically about something in a scientific context typically involves bringing empirical evidence to bear on a problem. This approach is used admirably in upper level classes in America, where students read original articles arguing different sides of a point, or prepare their own theses by placing their views in the context of previous work. Such complexity is necessarily absent from introductory classes, because students are still gaining the foundation necessary for such future endeavors. However, in lower level classes, most professors require students to engage in »critical thinking« exercises in which they are told to decide whether one point of view or another is correct, though the students clearly lack any of the information necessary to carry out a formal evaluation of the opposing views. Perhaps if this was used as a means of encouraging students to look for the information they do not know, doing research in the library, starting a study, etc., it would be beneficial in developing the students' understanding of the process of inquiry. Instead, because the exercise is conceptualized around getting students to »think critically«, students are told to defend ideas they are not vested in and know little about; thus limiting students to relying on hearsay and intuition. Thus students can only do well either by deploying their skills for creatively bullshiting or by guessing what the professor wants to hear. Depending on the option selected, I believe this encourages the student either to believe that decisions in psychology are made primarily through some similarly arbitrary process (lowering their opinion of psychology as a field), or to believe that the exercise has nothing to do with truly evaluating the issues raised (hopefully lowering their opinion of the professor). *Rather than trying to set up artificial situations in which students are told to challenge particular views, class should be a context in which students begin to master the knowledge that makes up the field of psychology, which will aid them in challenging things on their own in later classes.* Problem 3 – Including Cutting Edge Results

There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to keep course content up to date. Unfortunately, this can be taken too far, especially in a class that is supposed to be providing a foundational understanding. Not only are most cutting edge results only sensical within the complex context of current interests in the field, but most supposedly groundbreaking recent results will soon be regarded

by the field as inaccurate: How often does something happen in psychology that truly redefines the field? Frankly, a chemistry or physics book written 50 years ago, is probably still good enough to suffice for an introductory class in that subject. In contrast, Introductory Psychology text books written only 10 or 20 years ago can be terribly out of date because of their emphasis on fads.

I believe that American psychology professors think that mentioning recent findings makes psychology look like it is scientific. Ironically, because this is done at the expense of discussing more established findings, it has the opposite effect. Students are shown a host of recent, tenuous discoveries and so they conclude that psychology, as a field, lacks established results. This also erodes the institutional memory of the field, beginning the much complained of 15 year rule for the resurgence of old phenomena under a new name. Introductory classes should focus on reporting conclusive findings, establishing first principles of psychological research and theory, and demonstrating how past efforts in both experimental and applied psychology have led to improved knowledge and application. *Rather than trying to emphasize recent findings, class should emphasize established findings – instead of talking about conclusions that are generally accepted today, class should focus on findings that have remained generally accepted for long periods of time and thus serve as the impetus for past, current, and future work.* Problem 4 – Including Current Debates

Similar to the above points, textbook authors and teachers pride themselves on staying up to date on current debates in the field and on making such debates »accessible« to undergraduate students. Alas, this usually means that the issues are dumbed down to the point the controversies are fundamentally misrepresented. Worse, students are often asked what they think the solution to the debate is in their »critical thinking« exercises. This causes problems, because most current debates amongst top psychologists are too complex and nuanced to be dealt with seriously in an introductory class. Current debates are often poorly formed, and usually hinge on minutia in the details of complex methods for data gathering, analysis, and/or interpretation. Of course, these flaws are rarely obvious at the time of the debate, either to those involved, those watching, or those trying to bring their Introductory Psychology class into the middle of the mix. For an example of a poorly formed debate, Lehrman's 1970 look back on the debate between the evolution-oriented Konrad Lorenz and number of developmentally-

oriented Americans about instinct[3], reports that the arguments involved several miscommunications, misunderstandings, and some out of place political posturing that obscured the issues. In another retrospective, Hyman reported how several argumentative articles were published in a debate he was involved in before a chance meeting at a conference led the main debaters to realize »Our differences depended on specific details of methodological or statistical interpretations that were so minute that only Honorton and I would ever have mastered them sufficiently to be in a position to decide who was correct…[Further,] I realized that the continuing debate between Honorton and me was focused on the minutiae that only he and I could understand or would care about.«[4] Similarly, current arguments over whether there is a single type of intelligence or multiple intelligences largely focus on statistical issues that are quite complex, such as the appropriateness of different fitting functions for factor analysis.

The details of the examples above, should make it clear that students who hear a days lecture on the topics in question, will not be in a good position from which to weigh in on the debates. Teachers have many different reasons for trying to include current debates, but regardless of their intentions, I am convinced that there are negative consequences. In particular, encouraging students to take sides on these debates leads the general populace to believe that current debates in psychology can be solved by the intuition of undergraduate freshmen. The reality of these exercises is that the professor tells the students what will be discussed and what the options are, it is a purely academic game in which students are not allowed to challenge the rules or assumptions (for example, students can argue for or against multiple intelligence, but cannot suggest getting rid of the construct of intelligence altogether). The professor knows the issues are complex, and may reveal a bit of this complexity at their own leisure, but makes no effort to draw students into the complexity. The student, on the other hand, knowing only what the teacher has told them, thinks they are actually taking part in the debate process.

This may seem like an over exaggeration, but I do not think it is. Imagine trying to do the same thing in a physics class – telling introductory students to weigh in on, and provide solutions to, current debates in theoretical physics. Not only would that seem absurdly difficult, but totally unnecessary, as an introductory class is not the place in which to have future physics majors commit to posi-

tions on highly controversial arguments. That is not to say that psychology students could not be made aware of debates and some of the issues involved, but to give them class exercises in which they try to solve the debates is absurd. Such crude treatment of the material discourages students from taking a serious approach to the subject matter, by explicitly asking them to engage in the debates without empirical or theoretical grounding. *Rather than trying to get students to express opinions about current debates in psychology, Introductory Psychology classes should either try to expose students to the complexity of current debates or stay limited to explaining what was realized through past debates that have run their course.*

Problem 5 – Focusing on »Psychological Science«

It should be clear at this point that I think psychology can be treated as a science, and taught as a science. Unfortunately, instead of discussing psychology as one would a science, teachers often teach that psychology is a science. I encourage teachers to avoid the usual polemic of introductory texts, which wax on about the superiority of the scientific method over other methods of decision making. These long rants seem to result from psychology's general inferiority complex, and Americans' generally juvenile ways of dealing with such issues. Because psychologists feel threatened by accusations that they are not, or can not be, scientific, they feel the need to reply »We are scientific, we are, we are, we are!« Not to overwork the comparison, but chemistry and physics classes *do not* repeatedly remind students they are in a science class, instead they put the science on display and it is obvious without being said. They explain the methods by which chemists and physicists test their ideas, but rarely feel the need to explicitly say that those are »scientific« methods. The only reason to repeatedly claim your domain is a science, in this type of context, is because you fear it is not– ironically, rather than making psychology seem more scientific, it actually makes it seem less so by drawing students' attention to the denied claim. *Rather than including rhetoric and posturing in which teachers talk about what psychology »is«, Introductory Psychology courses should put on display the ways in which psychologists approach problems theoretically and empirically, and what results have come of such investigations.*

## Problems Arising from Textbook Structure

In addition to the generally flawed goals of Introductory Psychology courses, I believe there are three fundamental problems with the structure of all introductory textbooks currently available in the American market. These structural problems lead students to a poor understanding of the field. The problems are: 6) disjointed topic areas, 7) chapters on »method«, 8) chapters on »history«. Problem 6 – No Unified Field

Introductory texts generally present the field as a hodgepodge of areas of investigation held together largely by name. A typical book will have chapters such as History, Methods, Sensation, Personality, Developmental Psychology, and Abnormal Psychology. These sections will often have little overlap, even where overlap might naturally flow (such as discussion of personality development or methods of studying sensation). It is not surprising then that many students have difficulty understanding the connections between the things being taught; between, say, lever pressing rats, control of hormones by the hippocampus, repression of memories, and neuronal activation in the left-temporal lobe. Students regularly confront professors with questions like, »Why do I have to learn about the anatomy of the eye when I'm interested in *psychology*?!?« Such objections make it clear that the textbooks fail to present the material so that it is obvious why these topics are all being discussed together; they do not provide any explanation for why researchers studying this variety of topics are housed in the same department. I view this lack of conceptual unity as negative, primarily due to the effect it has on the students. A given chemistry student might know a lot about inorganic synthesis and little about naturally occurring biochemistry, but that student will likely have a way of understanding how a colleague's expertise in biochemistry fits with his own expertise inside the larger field of chemistry. In contrast, psychology majors often have little understanding of the field as a whole, do not understand how sub-disciplines relate to each other, and therefore become divisive members of the profession. To avoid this tendency, it is helpful to have some rubric under which the activities of psychologists can make sense relative to each other.

There are probably many ways of giving conceptual unity to the field, I have seen many articles and books that make suggestions. My preferred method is to say that psychology is the empirical study of knowledge and experience.[5] I

return to this rubric when introducing different areas of investigation, using that schema to explain how such investigations serve the goals of psychology. Each new area either serves to improve our understanding how people come to know things or our understanding of the nature of people's experiences. For example, I tell them that psychologists are interested in sensation, because studies of sensation have helped us understand how we come to *know* things about the world; and that psychologists are interested in memory because they are interested in why some things are *experienced* as remembered and other things are not. This connects the theoretical concerns to the empirical investigation, feels relatively natural to me when I teach, and seems applicable to any subjects covered in the textbooks. Others have suggested using the concept of »levels of analysis«, with physiology as a lower level, personality and cognition on a middle level, and social and cultural psychology on a higher level. I do not think any means of integration is »right« or »wrong«, but think that a unifying scheme can help students place the material they are learning within the bigger picture of the field. Rather than trying to stay neutral as to the relationship between different psychological disciplines, textbooks would serve students and professors better if they integrated the areas studied by psychologists in a way that made the field as a whole more sensical. Problem 7 – Chapters on »Method«

Most Introductory Psychology textbooks have an early chapter on research methods. These chapters attempt to explain different ways of performing empirical investigation and have some information on statistical analyses appropriate for the different techniques. It may be important that students learn these distinctions in an introductory class, but a separate section on »methods«, before any subject matter has been discussed, is certainly not the correct way to accomplish that goal. Again, imagine spending the first or second week of an intro chemistry class working through a chapter on »chemistry research methods«. Methods cannot exist in a vacuum, they are a means, not an ends. Treatment of methods in this way, from the first moment of the American Psychologist's education, leads to the overarching symptom that American psychology is research driven, not question driven. That is, the research performed is often dictated by technological and methodological concerns, reshaping the theory to fit the apparatus and not the other way around. The independent methods section is the first step towards the strong pressure felt by researchers to meet often arbitrary research

standards regardless of whether those standards are relevant to the questions being asked.[6] This is because teaching research methods this way does convey the relationship between the questions being asked and the methods being used. *Rather than have a separate section on research methods, textbooks should discuss the methods that lead to important findings in the context of discussing the findings themselves*.

Problem 8 – Chapters on »History«

Similarly, there is something very inappropriate about the generic chapter on History of Psychology, found at the beginning of most all textbooks. These chapters discuss the history of things the students have not yet read about, and set the stage for an emphasis on names and no-longer-used concepts throughout the book. Learning the history of a field is good, if you will have a career in that field or are interested in the history itself, but talk of history can easily be overdone in an introductory course. Discussion of history can help provide students with a sense of the depth of psychology and the cumulative nature of its study. However, this depth is in no way conveyed by a generic chapter talking about the »phases« of psychology or »schools« of psychology on a superficial level. This emphasizes nominalism rather than understanding. Depth is better conveyed by exposing students, however briefly, to the more than 100 years of investigation into the subjects of perception, development, behavior modification, etc.

For some reason, psychologists think it is very important to discuss who discovered, labeled, or popularized different phenomenon, and in American classes this can often overshadow discussion of the phenomenon itself. This is reflected in the tests students are given both in class and in national standardized tests. For example, the psychology GRE[7] is more likely to ask a question phrased to be about B.F. Skinner, than a question phrased to be about operant behavior. While it is true that individuals are discussed in the introductory classes of other fields, the names are few and far between: Most biology classes will mention Darwin, most physics classes Newton and Einstein, etc. Even then, the emphasis will likely be on the work, rather than the people: Questions will be about the theory of evolution, or about the path taken by falling objects. In those other classes, things discovered long ago will be discussed thoroughly, but the professor will not feel obligated to emphasize that the knowledge was discovered long ago. The discussion of historic discoveries simply does not require discussion of history itself. *Rather than have a separate section on the history of psychology, textbooks should*

*focus on past and current discoveries and theoretical innovations and keep explicit discussion of history to a minimum.*

## What entrenches the problems?

At this point in history, it will be very difficult for American psychology to change any of these problems. There are obvious reasons: First, Introductory Psychology is not generally thought to be problematic, and so instructors try to emulate the structures of the class they had as students. Second, Introductory Psychology is often seen as a »service course«. That is, the professors who teach it view their efforts as a service to the department or the university, rather than an obligation on the same level as the advanced courses in their particular area of expertise. There are, however, enough professors who genuinely care about the course, and who constantly strive to improve it, that there is little good excuse for its staying in the present state. That suggests that there are less obvious forces at work. I believe that the problems listed above are currently entrenched in the American system by the benefits this structure gives to psychology departments and textbook publishers.

## Benefits to the Psychology Departments

In America, Psychology is often a »default« major. That is, it is a) something you do when you don't know what you want to do, and b) something you do after you fail at doing something else. On top of that, Introductory Psychology, often fulfills »breadth« requirements that all undergraduates at liberal arts colleges must meet. On top of that still, Introductory Psychology is often viewed as the easiest class available to fulfill such requirements. Combined, these factors make Introductory Psychology the highest enrolled class on almost any college campus. You might be tempted to think this would burden American psychology departments, but the reality is typically the opposite. While the individual instructors that must teach the large classes are often dismayed, the department as a whole reaps huge benefits. Undergraduates in the American system, especially at the larger universities, often function primarily to fund the work of graduate students and professors. The large number of majors, combined with the large number of non-majors taking courses, gives the department as a whole access to numerous resources that might otherwise be denied them. At a minimum, it justifies having a large depart-

ment, and getting other fiscal resources. The instructors who teach these »service« courses may similarly benefit by having a lower overall teaching load or gaining flexibility in terms of scheduling, service on committees, etc. If the course suddenly became more rigorous, or even just less enjoyable, the departments would suffer. *European universities should be wary of the fiscal and political implications of teaching Introductory Psychology in the American way, as once they start, it may be difficult to stop.*

## Benefits to the Textbook Publishers

Because Introductory Psychology classes are so big, there is a lot of money to be made writing, publishing, and selling textbooks for them.[8] Hence, these books are designed for the mass market, designed to accommodate as many professors' styles as possible. There is then tremendous pressure toward standardization; I have been told by people in »the business« that all new textbooks must have at least 85% overlap of content with existing textbooks or publishers are not interested. Further, in an almost Orwellian fashion any trait claimed by one publisher must be adopted by other publishers regardless of whether it makes sense. For example, one company's assertion that their textbooks are »up to date with recent developments in the field«, makes it obligatory that all other company's follow their lead: Why would you ever use a text book that wasn't up to date?[9]

Another party to blame is the used book market, which has become very large in America. It is customary for students to sell almost all of their class books back at the end of the semester, and for half or more of the books being sold at any campus book store to be previously used. This is viewed as a benefit to the student, who often has to spend a great deal of money on books. The reality is that darker factors are disguised by this practice. Publishers cannot make as much money printing textbooks, because the majority of books they will ever print are sold in the first year after the book is published (when there are no used copies available). As such, A) the cost of new books goes up, because the textbook companies need to make the same amount of profit off of fewer book sales and B) there is incredible pressure to come out with new editions every few years, to undercut the used book market. If it were not for the used book market, the costs of texts would drop considerably and at least some companies would start to focus on textbooks that would last for a longer amount of time. *European teachers should*

*demand that textbooks meet their needs, not dictate their needs, and they should strive to use textbooks students will want to keep as resources.*

## Concluding Remarks

If psychologists in Europe are not careful, they will become stuck in the same trap that American psychologists are in. The content of their flagship course is dictated primarily by textbook publishers, and market forces make it difficult to change anything in any substantive way. The structure of the course is ineffective in preparing psychology majors for upper level classes, and does not represent the field well to those just passing through.

It may not be necessary to have an Introductory Psychology course, but when students enter the field knowing little about it, a broad overview might be helpful. Because of the breadth of what is covered, primary readings are out of the question and so textbooks are used. As most professors are specialists, and do not have a broad background in psychology, the textbook dictates course structure and content. In order to be the least offensive to the most people, and hence to capture a larger market share, textbooks cover even more material and become very generic. Next, in order to convince people that they need newer textbooks, i.e. to keep sales going, the textbooks must constantly be updated to stay »current« and to follow recent advances in »pedagogical theory«. Professors then mirror these structural elements, striving to dumb down the material until it is »accessible« to all, proudly mentioning recent findings and current debates, telling students they must engage in critical thinking, and repeating over and over again that psychology is a true science. In turn students who learn under this system go on to reproduce it, both in their teaching and in their work as the future leaders of the field.

Because of this power loop, the format of introductory psychology becomes the later reality of the field of psychology. I firmly believe that many of the larger problems of the field are the continuation of the problems mentioned above, which begin in the introductory class. Therefore, the pressure that European psychologists feel to mirror the American teaching system, has political implications beyond the classroom. Once adopted, these lower level structures have the power to reshape the field itself.

## Endnotes

1 While I am probably more positivistic than many readers of Journal für Psychologie, I do not think this difference will make the discussion any less relevant. All that is important is that value be seen in understanding what has been done in the past. I believe that psychologists see the world in a particular way because they are familiar with certain arguments, certain results, and certain explanations for those results. Learning what has come before is then necessary if one is to understand the perspective of people in the field, it need not be about learning what is »right«. I urge the reader to forgive any instances in which I might drift towards the latter type of talk.

2 I urge readers not to have a knee jerk reaction about my use of the term "science". By science, I mean empirical: that our experiences can tell us what the world is like. Other so-called true sciences seem well aware that empirical observations need not conform to the modern notion of a well-controlled experiment, and they respect philosophers far more than mainstream American psychology. Even if you are not concerned with convincing your students that psychology is a science, please consider the effects being discussed.

3 Lehrman, Daniel S. (1970). Semantic and conceptual issues in the nature-nurture problem. In Aronson, L. R., Tobach, E., Lehrman, D. S., and Rosenblatt, J. S. (eds.), Development and Evolution of Behavior, Essays in Memory of T. C. Schneirla. (pp. 17-52). Academic Press: New York.

4 Hyman, Ray (1995). How to critique a published article. Psychological Bulletin, 118, 178-182.

5 Again, empirical need not mean well-controlled experiment. For example, Freud was incredibly empirically oriented, in that he continuously returned to his own experiences and the experiences of his patients.

6 This problem is, of course, amplified by the "Research Methods" course required for most psychology majors.

7 Graduate Record Exam – required for entrance into many graduate schools.

8 My former mentor wrote a relatively unsuccessful Introductory Psychology textbook in the 1970's, and he and his partner each made $80,000. David Meyers, the most successful textbook author of the last half-century recently donated $1,000,000 to the Association for Psychological Science to endowed

a fund to support teaching psychology. I won't hazard to guess how much money the publishers make.

9 For more on the effectiveness of this type of political move in America, look at the voting records of Congress in response to the bills labeled "The Patriot Act" and "No Child Left Behind". Also, the ever present threat of someone claiming "Doing X would bring comfort to our enemies."

## Author information

**Eric P. Charles**

Eric P. Charles received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Davis. He is currently a post-doctoral fellow at Clark University, studying infant development and American philosophical approaches to psychology with Dr. Thompson. Beginning in the fall of 2008 he will be an Assistant Professor at Pennsylvania State University, Altoona. He is interested in radical approaches to psychology (radical empiricism, radical behaviorism, radical pragmatism), the ecological psychology of James J. Gibson, and the evolution and development of behavior.

Eric P. Charles erlangte seinen Ph.D. an der Universität von Kalifornien, Davis. Er ist Post-doctoral Fellow an der Clark-Universität und beschäftigt sich mit Säuglingsforschung und amerikanischen philosophischen Ansätzen von Psychologie mit Dr. Thompson. Ab Herbst 2008, wird er als Assistenzprofessor an der Staat Pennsylvania-Universität, Altoona tätig sein. Er ist an radikalen Ansätzen zur Psychologie (radikale Empirie, radikaler Behaviorismus, radikaler Pragmatismus), der ökologischen Psychologie von James J. Gibson, an Entwicklung und der Entwicklung von Verhalten interessiert.

*Eric P. Charles*
*Department of Psychology*
*Clark University*
*950 Main St.*
*Worcester, MA 01610*

E-Mail: echarles@clarku.edu