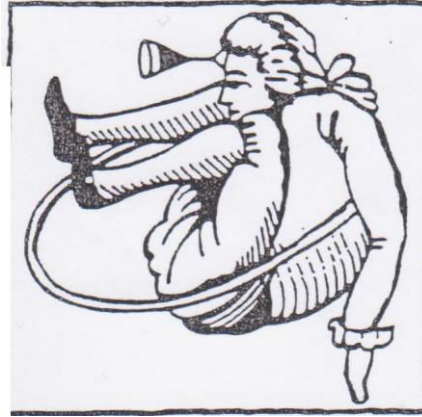


# The Skills Acquired in Psychology Degrees



**Hayes suggests that graduate psychologists have a lot more to offer than most of them suspect.**

During the past 20 years or so, psychology graduates have often emerged from their degrees with a comprehensive lack of awareness of the potential careers ahead of them. Typically, they have some dim knowledge about clinical, educational or occupational psychology, but little about other openings. And it is not at all unknown for many graduates to spend quite a period of time unemployed after they graduate on the grounds that "there's nothing they can do". Follow-up studies conducted six months after graduation present a far more pessimistic picture of graduate destinations than those conducted a couple of years later.

Traditionally, too, degree teaching staff have been very little help in the process, being largely unaware themselves of the opportunities which are open to psychology graduates. The fact is, that psychology graduates acquire a number of valuable transferable skills on their courses, which actually equip them to undertake a wide range of graduate careers. But they tend to limit their ambitions and narrow their choices mainly because both they themselves and the people who teach them have not

realised - or verbalised clearly - just what those skills are.

University or polytechnic careers staff are not usually much help either. They too are often unaware of the skills a psychology graduate possesses, and so fail to advise students as to the full range of possible options. Psychology's relatively low profile over the past 20 years has meant that advisers have often *been* using a very outdated model of psychology, which includes images of rats in boxes and mechanistic behaviourist models. It is small wonder that they cannot think of many relevant *careers!*

Psychological skills have a tendency to become very deeply internalised, so that they often feel just like "common-sense". Moreover, the style of thinking one acquires on a psychology degree is one which feels intuitively obvious - so much so that people who have it are often unaware of what they have acquired. Psychology graduates have distinctive ways of looking at social and interpersonal problems, which make them valuable in just about any job which involves dealing with people. Yet

they often believe that they do not see anything more than other people, and when they venture into *the* outside world they are often surprised at how other people appear to overlook the obvious.

Many of us, when we first entered psychology, were told that we need not expect to be learning about people, but instead about theoretical models and rigorous methodology, which might or might not have some relevance. There may have been some case for that, in the days when psychology was dominated by the behaviourist paradigm, although even then I firmly believe that it was selling itself short; but there certainly is not a case for it now. Since the 1960s, the cognitive revolution and its parallel developments in social psychology have transformed **our** understanding of human beings, and the growth in applications of psychology within the wider society demonstrate its relevance all the time. Psychology has no longer any need to apologise for its existence, if it ever did. And a typical psychology degree is an excellent general education with which to face the world.

I have listed below some of the skills which a typical psychology graduate will have acquired during his/her degree course. None of them are unique to psychology, of course; but not many disciplines can offer so comprehensive a list. How often, for instance, do you find graduates who are simultaneously literate, numerate; computer-literate and good at problem-solving?

**Literacy.** The ability to write both succinct reports and more lengthy analyses. Psychology graduates are accustomed to writing essays, which allow them to explore issues in detail; but they also become familiar with the techniques of concise writing - within a pre-set format, as they write up their practical reports. The ability to produce a concise report is often cited by managers as a skill they would like their management trainees to have. •

**Numeracy.** The ability to handle and interpret statistical information. Not many jobs require mathematical whizz-kids; but psychology graduates are good at drawing\* the implications out of data summaries and probability statements.

**Computer literacy.** The ability to use a computer package, whether a word-processing or statistics; and the ability to learn to use new ones. The ability to programme is rarely required; and most organisations accept that their own systems are likely to be new. But most psychology graduates are familiar with

the basic use of computer packages by *the* time they graduate.

**interpersonal awareness.** Knowledge of the mechanisms of social communication and the potential sources of interpersonal conflict. This is not the same as being socially skilled oneself (although it contributes), but does make a difference to understanding and dealing with interpersonal problems when they arise *in* the workplace. And most psychology graduates are familiar with this type of knowledge (although perhaps some degrees could do more in familiarising them in the application of it).

**Environmental awareness.** Knowing how environments, organisations etc. can directly influence people's understanding and behaviour. Some of this stems from traditional stimulus-response perspectives within psychology, and some may come from a direct study of environmental psychology. Very few psychology graduates *are* unaware of the importance of environment, and yet many non-psychologists do not notice environmental factors.

**Problem-solving skills.** The ability to identify different strategies and approaches to solving problems. This may be on a macro-level, in applying totally different perspectives or levels of analysis to the problem, or at a more basic level in terms of choosing appropriate methods to deal with it. It is a valuable skill in the organisational world, and one which psychology graduates are strikingly good at. But then we train them in it from their very first lab class, don't we?

**Information-finding skills.** Knowing how to go about looking for information on a particular topic or general area. Not a skill needed for every job, but useful in many of them nonetheless.

**Critical evaluation.** The ability to appraise information and situations realistically, and to anticipate problems or difficulties. An essential skill for a manager or management trainee; and useful in many others. And again, it is one in which psychology graduates are directly trained.

**Research skills.** Knowing how to go about gathering systematic information about human experience or behaviour. We train students in a number of different methods - at the least, observational, experimental and case study techniques. Such awareness of methodology is useful to any number of different professions, some obvious ones being marketing and health education.

**Measurement skills.** Knowing how to go about designing questionnaires and developing other measurement tools. Psychology graduates acquire these



skills, again normally as part of their methodology course. But they are not easy skills to acquire; and not many graduates understand the underlying principles of them as thoroughly as does a typical psychology graduate.

**Perspectives.** The ability to look at issues from several different points of view. Although this is a skill in which psychology graduates are directly trained, they often do not realise that they have acquired it. But it is a valuable one for an employer.

**Higher-order analysis.** The ability to extract general principles from immediate or concrete situations. Psychology graduates tend to be barter than most

## Jobs for which psychology graduates have suitable skills:

### Public Sector:

community work  
vocational guidance  
press liaison  
police work  
social care  
health service management  
advice work  
nurse training  
teaching  
counselling  
career service  
civil service  
charity organisation  
health education

### Private Sector:

advertising  
television research  
public relations  
insurance  
marketing  
marketing research  
personnel  
administration  
general management  
industrial training  
ergonomics/human factors R & D  
retail management  
radio journalism  
science writing

people at spotting recurrent patterns or similarities between situations, **and** at looking at issues in terms of their underlying principles rather than becoming bogged down with the details of the immediate situation.

**Pragmatism.** The ability to make the best of a non-ideal situation, and to get on with working within pre-sat constraints. It does not take much exposure to psychological methodology for psychology students to realise that the perfect experiment is going to be elusive; and they will simply have to get on with doing it as well as possible anyway! As graduates, this tends to give them a strongly practical element which is valuable in many forms of work. Many of our graduates fail to do justice to themselves in interviews because they freeze up when they come to the dreaded question: And what do you have to offer us? They tend to have great difficulty verbalising the skills that they have **acquired**, and also fail to recognise that other graduates may not have them. Psychology does not just equip students for the psychological professions: it is a good background for any number of 'general-subject graduate' careers. More *than* once now I have heard personnel and training managers from large multi-nationals say that they like to employ psychology graduates; but why do so few of them apply? I believe that *the* reason is that **we do not let them know what they have to offer.**

If graduate employment records are to become a significant performance indicator, then we must encourage our graduates to think broadly in their choices of career, and to be clear and articulate about what they have to offer their potential employers. There are any number of job options open to them, both in the public and private sector: I have listed 28 of them in the Table, but there are many more which could have gone on the list.

Is it not time we started infusing our graduates with a bit more confidence?

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