

studies is increasingly an exercise in conformity, and does not encourage risk-taking or original thinking in psychology, or any other discipline for that matter! It saddens me that young minds are deprived of insights which might come from a more concrete exploration of their interests and the freedom to question the assumptions of this human science.

Being the political football that it is, the whole school curriculum is reliably booted into reform once every 5 years or so. This last happened in 2015 when the changes first initiated by Michael Gove as Education Minister in David Cameron's Coalition government brought about some important changes.

In the short-term these spelled the welcome end of a resit culture which had gripped schools and contributed significantly to student anxiety levels and teacher workload. It also enabled students to once again enter university with three rather than four A-levels.

On the other hand, the failure to re-introduce a practical research element to the rebranded 2015 version of psychology A-level

represents a missed opportunity in post-16 education. Indeed, in light of our discipline's replication crisis, this is a rather ironic state of affairs. Coursework in psychology would enable students to think outside the narrow confines of the examination specification and give them the chance to try to reproduce some of the classic research they encounter in their A-level studies.

Since 2015, the mental health and well-being of school students has become a national priority and schools are being viewed as places where early prevention and intervention might ease the burden on an overwhelmed Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Yet, the psychology A-level specification still omits to incorporate the well-established insights of counselling psychology, positive psychology, mindfulness, and health psychology in any substantial way.

Culturally-diverse the content of psychology A-level is not. Taking a global perspective, many key studies in the specification are based on research in which sample groups are drawn mostly from US groups

that are overwhelmingly WEIRD in their demographic make-up – Western, Educated college student groups drawn from post-Industrial, materially Rich, Democratic nation states.

Although A-level students are encouraged to criticise the validity of data and assess the culture-bias inherent in the research they encounter, this exercise changes nothing fundamental about the specification, and gives them little insight into the behaviour of other participant populations around the world.

It is high time to substantially revise the content and structure of the received psychology A-level canon of literature if we want to avoid the accusation of being backward looking, insular and irrelevant as a science, and to prepare the young minds we educate to best face an unknown future in which psychology has something of worth to contribute to a world marked by a changing climate.

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A demand to avoid demand avoidance?

A growing interest around Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) has been reflected in letters to this magazine, discussing possible explanations for PDA, specifically as a form of autism or attachment disorder. Nonetheless, the main PDA discourse portrays it as a distinct syndrome that is part of the autism spectrum. Yet PDA is not in the diagnostic manuals and there is a substantially poor scientific case for the construct.

The PDA behavioural profile lacks specificity and overlaps many other conditions, including common autism comorbidities. Furthermore, research indicates PDA itself is not unique to autism, its behaviours are not caused by autism and many persons diagnosed with PDA are unlikely to be autistic. This pluripotential nature is compounded by flawed screening and diagnostic tools, containing vague questions and frequent reliance on caregiver reports; therefore much of PDA research has various possible sources of confirmation bias and alternative explanations.

Primarily, PDA research is focusing on reliability over validity, partly with the aim to maintain integrity of its dominant discourse. Since autism has moved to validity based nosology, PDA is unlikely to enter diagnostic manuals, and some view it as a threat to validity of clinical

language.

Crucially, under the Department for Education and Department of Health's 2015 Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice, individuals should receive appropriate strategies regardless of their exact diagnosis. Pertinently, according to the short report of a 2019 meeting of the PDA Society (tinyurl.com/yxds7mvc), children with a diagnosis of PDA do not experience an increased number of formal school exclusions, but do experience more 'informal exclusions'.

My own citation survey suggests that the key PDA literature is being accessed thousands of times, with negligible levels critical scholarship referenced. I would argue there is a need for a scientific approach to PDA, prioritising the integrity and validity of autism, over diagnosing PDA. In a time when psychologists such as Sue Fletcher-Watson are advocating participatory autism research (tinyurl.com/yxmqqpg8), and with my own research (tinyurl.com/y2kwcwsj) suggesting that PDA is not a recognised research priority of the autistic population, an ethical debate is required to discuss the merits of diagnosing and researching it.

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