

# Psychology's contemporary and all-time notables: Student, faculty, and chairperson viewpoints

STEPHEN F. DAVIS, ROGER L. THOMAS, and MELANIE S. WEAVER  
*Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas 66801*

Chairpersons of graduate psychology departments were surveyed to determine which psychologists this group viewed as having achieved contemporary and all-time importance. The results of this survey were compared with similar data gathered in 1966. To provide a basis for additional comparisons, all psychology students and faculty at a regional midwestern university were administered similar surveys.

Schultz (1981) indicates that "two approaches can be taken to explain how a science like psychology develops: the personalistic or 'Great Man' theory and the naturalistic or 'Zeitgeist' theory." Throughout the years, the relative merits of these two theories have been hotly contested (see Schultz, 1975). However, the intensity of this debate appears to have subsided considerably in recent years. In fact, two recent texts (Leahey, 1980; Sahakian, 1981) dealing with the history of psychology do not even mention it. That this debate is becoming much less pronounced might possibly be linked to the current nature of theorizing in psychology. Grand, encompassing theories, such as those proposed by Hull (1943, 1952), Spence (1960), Thorndike (1931), and Tolman (1932), have given way to a new wave of mini-theories (see Schultz, 1975). Likewise, the number of divisions or specialties represented within the American Psychological Association has witnessed rapid growth and expansion in recent years. Psychology is truly becoming recognized as a multifaceted discipline.

Such trends toward diversification of speciality areas suggest that the number of psychologists whose names are recognizable across all aspects of the discipline may be dwindling. In 1966, a Southern Methodist University survey (Moore & Seberhagen, Note 1) was sent to chairpersons of American and Canadian graduate psychology programs. The purpose of this survey was to determine who these individuals viewed as the most important contemporary and all-time psychologists. The results of this 1966 survey are shown in Table 1.

These 15-year-old data prompted several questions: How lasting has the popularity or perceived importance of those listed in 1966 been (i.e., how would a similar sample respond in 1981)? How would the responses from a single institution compare with those of a national sample? How well do student opinions compare

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Table 1  
Most Important Contemporary and All-Time Psychologists  
According to Graduate Psychology Department  
Chairpersons—1966

Contemporary	Points	All Time	Points
1. B. F. Skinner	688	1. S. Freud	668
2. C. R. Rogers	324	2. W. James	400
3. N. E. Miller	311	3. W. Wundt	329
4. H. F. Harlow	273	4. J. B. Watson	328
5. D. O. Hebb	253	5. I. P. Pavlov	287
6. G. W. Allport	197	6. C. Hull	285
7. J. Piaget	192	7. E. L. Thorndike	214
8. E. G. Boring	152	8. E. C. Tolman	129
9. K. Spence	138	9. B. F. Skinner	122
10. J. S. Bruner	136	10. A. Binet	117
Total Names Listed	132	Total Names Listed	88

Note—W. K. Estes and L. Festinger would be added to the list of contemporary psychologists on the basis of total number of votes; W. Kohler would be added to the list of all-time psychologists on the basis of total number of votes. Mailing sample: Psychology department chairpersons ( $n = 89$ ) listed by Ross and Harmon (1966).

with those of the faculty providing their instruction? The present project sought to provide tentative answers to such questions.

The initial phase essentially replicated the 1966 survey. A letter briefly outlining the project and requesting cooperation in listing the 10 most important contemporary psychologists and the 10 most important psychologists from any time period was sent to each member of the Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology. Although this was not exactly the same source of respondents (Ross & Harmon, 1966) employed in the previous survey, it was deemed similar enough to allow comparisons. As with the earlier survey, weighted ranks (i.e., 10 for psychologists ranked first, 9 for those ranked second, etc.) were assigned to the responses. The results of this survey are shown in Table 2.

Comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveals several interesting trends. The most readily apparent finding was that

**Table 2**  
**Most Important Contemporary and All-Time Psychologists**  
**According to Graduate Psychology Department**  
**Chairpersons—1981**

Contemporary	Points	All Time	Points
1. B. F. Skinner	622	1. S. Freud	469
2. C. R. Rogers	295	2. B. F. Skinner	355
3. N. Miller	233	3. J. Piaget	254
4. D. O. Hebb	155	4. I. Pavlov	210
5. A. Bandura	154	5. W. James	202
6. E. Hilgard	84	J. B. Watson	202
7. L. Cronbach	78	7. C. Hull	173
8. H. F. Harlow	77	W. Wundt	173
9. E. Erikson	72	9. E. L. Thorndike	157
10. L. Festinger	68	10. C. R. Rogers	92
Total Names Listed	153	Total Names Listed	105

*Note*—H. Eysenck and W. Estes would be added to the list of contemporary psychologists on the basis of total number of votes; E. C. Tolman would be added to the list of all-time psychologists on the basis of total number of votes. Mailing sample: Members of the Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology ( $n = 72$ ).

several of the persons listed in 1966 were also listed, with identical rankings, in 1981. For example, B. F. Skinner, Carl Rogers, and Neal Miller were listed, in that order, as the three most important contemporary psychologists. H. F. Harlow and D. O. Hebb round out the five psychologists who were common to the two contemporary lists. Similarly, eight persons were mentioned on both all-time lists: Freud, James, Wundt, Pavlov, Hull, Watson, Thorndike, and Skinner. Despite several deaths (e.g., Boring, Piaget, Spence), only Piaget was able to make the transition from the 1966 contemporary to the 1981 all-time list. His ranking of third in 1981 would not appear to be a chance happening. The only other psychologist to be added to the 1981 all-time list was Carl Rogers. It is also interesting, and perhaps important, to note that a larger number of different names was proposed by the 1981 respondents than by the 1966 respondents. More specifically, the 89 respondents to the 1966 survey listed 132 contemporary and 88 all-time persons, whereas the 72 respondents to the 1981 survey listed 153 contemporary and 105 all-time candidates. This increase in numbers would seem to suggest that psychology has, indeed, become more specialized and/or compartmentalized.

To examine the relationship between responses on the national survey and those from a single institution, the second portion of the study asked all Emporia State University psychology faculty and graduate teaching assistants to complete the same instrument as was used in the national survey. The same weighted-ranks scoring procedure was used to evaluate these responses. The complete faculty and teaching assistant preferences are shown in Table 3. A comparison of Tables 2 and 3 reveals remarkable similarities between the all-time lists. All of the names listed by the national sample were also

listed by the departmental faculty. Likewise, with the exception of Carl Rogers, the teaching assistants' responses coincided with the national all-time list. A more detailed inspection of these tables indicates that some variations in rank ordering were present. The most noticeable variation would appear to be the ranks afforded B. F. Skinner and Sigmund Freud by the teaching assistants.

A consideration of the contemporary portion of Tables 2 and 3 yields a somewhat more complicated picture. Only five names (Skinner, Rogers, Hebb, Bandura, and Miller) are common to all three lists. Of these, only B. F. Skinner retained the same ranking, first, on all three lists. However, given that only five names were common to the contemporary portions of the 1966 and 1981 national surveys, this complexity may simply reflect a state of change regarding those contemporary psychologists who are viewed as prominent or important. Further, the listing of Frank Beach, an Emporia State alumnus, on both contemporary lists in Table 3 would appear to be reflective of the role that specific institutional ties and/or regional biases may play in the perception of importance.

The final phase of the study sought to determine the degree of correspondence that exists between the responses of those providing instruction (i.e., faculty and teaching assistants) and the responses of their students. All students enrolled in psychology courses at Emporia State University during the semester in which the national and faculty surveys were administered were asked to respond to the following questions: "Who is

**Table 3**  
**Most Important Contemporary and All-Time Psychologists**  
**According to Emporia State University Faculty**  
**and Graduate Teaching Assistants—1981**

Contemporary	Points	All Time	Points
Faculty ( $n = 11$ )			
1. B. F. Skinner	109	1. S. Freud	80
2. C. Rogers	51	2. B. F. Skinner	71
3. H. Harlow	34	3. J. B. Watson	68
4. A. Bandura	33	4. J. Piaget	49
D. O. Hebb	33	5. W. Wundt	48
6. J. Bruner	22	6. I. Pavlov	41
7. N. Miller	20	E. L. Thorndike	41
8. F. Beach	16	8. W. James	28
A. Amsel	16	9. C. Hull	21
10. J. Kagan	15	10. C. Rogers	16
Graduate Teaching Assistants ( $n = 7$ )			
1. B. F. Skinner	66	1. B. F. Skinner	43
2. A. Bandura	33	2. I. Pavlov	41
3. D. O. Hebb	32	3. W. Wundt	38
4. C. Rogers	25	4. S. Freud	35
5. A. Amsel	21	5. C. Hull	26
6. J. Piaget	18	J. B. Watson	26
7. N. Miller	12	J. Piaget	26
J. Wolpe	12	8. W. James	25
9. F. Beach	9	9. E. L. Thorndike	24
10. D. Premack	9	10. A. Binet	11

the most important contemporary (living) psychologist?" and "Who is the most important psychologist of all time?" Students were also asked to indicate their gender and course number on the questionnaire. All questionnaires were completed in a regular class session during the 12th week of the semester. To avoid duplications, students were requested not to repeat the questionnaire if they had completed it in another class.

Responses were tallied by gender and course level (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior-graduate). The 10 most popular responses (determined by frequency) for each category are shown in Table 4. It is interesting, although perhaps not surprising, to note that, regardless of sex, Sigmund Freud was unanimously listed as the most important psychologist of all time. Similarly, it can be argued that B. F. Skinner was regarded as the

Table 4  
Most Important Contemporary and All-Time Psychologists According to Emporia State University Students—1981

Male Students				Female Students			
Contemporary	Votes	All Time	Votes	Contemporary	Votes	All Time	Votes
Freshman Students							
1. B. F. Skinner	26	1. S. Freud	97	1. None Listed	51	1. S. Freud	127
2. None Listed	19	2. None Listed	5	2. B. F. Skinner	34	2. B. F. Skinner	12
3. Class Instructor	17	3. A. Maslow	3	3. C. Rogers	16	3. A. Maslow	11
4. C. Rogers	8	4. J. Piaget	3	4. J. Brothers	15	4. E. Erikson	10
5. J. Piaget	6	B. F. Skinner	3	5. J. Piaget	12	5. J. B. Watson	4
6. A. Maslow	5	J. B. Watson	3	6. K. Menninger	8	6. I. Pavlov	3
Text Author	5	7. C. Jung	2	Class Instructor	8	None Listed	3
8. H. Harlow	4	C. Rogers	2	8. A. Bandura	6	8. C. Darwin	2
9. J. Brothers	3	9. E. Erikson	1	9. E. Erikson	5	J. Piaget	2
E. Erikson	3	I. Pavlov	1	H. Harlow	5	C. Rogers	2
ESU Faculty	3	W. Wundt	1	A. Maslow	5	E. L. Thorndike	2
(n = 122)		(n = 122)		(n = 182)		(n = 182)	
Sophomore Students							
1. B. F. Skinner	14	1. S. Freud	27	1. None Listed	33	1. S. Freud	78
2. E. Erikson	3	2. J. Piaget	5	2. B. F. Skinner	29	2. J. Piaget	66
K. Menninger	3	3. B. F. Skinner	2	3. E. Erikson	25	3. B. F. Skinner	10
None Listed	3	4. E. Berne	1	4. K. Menninger	13	4. I. Pavlov	3
5. J. Brothers	2	C. Jung	1	5. C. Rogers	9	5. A. Adler	2
F. Perls	2	J. B. Watson	1	6. J. Brothers	8	C. Darwin	2
Class Instructor	2	None Listed	1	J. Piaget	8	E. Erikson	2
(n = 38)*		(n = 38)		8. M. Banks	6	C. Jung	2
				9. A. Maslow	4	J. B. Watson	2
				Class Instructor	4	None Listed	2
				(n = 173)		(n = 173)	
Junior Students							
1. B. F. Skinner	50	1. S. Freud	38	1. B. F. Skinner	95	1. S. Freud	75
2. K. Menninger	6	2. J. Piaget	10	2. None Listed	16	2. J. Piaget	43
3. C. Rogers	5	3. J. B. Watson	9	3. E. Erikson	12	3. J. B. Watson	9
4. J. Bruner	3	4. B. F. Skinner	7	4. K. Menninger	11	4. B. F. Skinner	8
5. A. Bandura	2	5. I. Pavlov	3	5. J. Bruner	7	5. A. Binet	6
(n = 84)**		6. W. James	2	6. J. Piaget	6	6. K. Menninger	5
		C. Rogers	2	C. Rogers	6	7. None Listed	4
		T. Szasz	2	8. A. Anastasi	4	8. W. James	3
		W. Wundt	2	9. J. Brothers	2	C. Jung	3
		(n = 84)		Class Instructor	2	I. Pavlov	3
				(n = 172)		(n = 172)	
Senior and Graduate Students							
1. B. F. Skinner	17	1. S. Freud	10	1. B. F. Skinner	17	1. S. Freud	10
2. C. Rogers	4	2. J. B. Watson	4	2. C. Rogers	8	J. Piaget	10
3. G. Bower	1	J. Piaget	4	3. None Listed	4	3. C. Jung	2
M. Gazzaniga	1	4. C. Beers	1	4. C. Jung	2	4. I. Pavlov	2
A. Maslow	1	C. Hull	1	W. Glasser	2	B. F. Skinner	2
None Listed	1	A. Maslow	1	(n = 41)†		(n = 41)††	
(n = 25)		I. Pavlov	1				
		C. Rogers	1				
		B. F. Skinner	1				
		W. Wundt	1				
		(n = 25)					

\*Nine others received one vote each. \*\*Seventeen others received one vote each; one student had none listed. †Eight others received one vote each. ††Eleven others received one vote each.

most important contemporary psychologist. However, this conclusion must be qualified by indicating that the most frequent response among freshman and sophomore females in the contemporary category was no response at all. Likewise, Table 4 also indicates that males in freshman and sophomore courses and junior-level females also showed a tendency (albeit, not as pronounced) to not list a contemporary psychologist. It should be noted that all questionnaires ( $n = 6$ ) failing to list a name in at least one of the categories were not included in these tabulations. As one progresses through the courses from freshman to senior-graduate levels, it can be seen that the frequency of the "none listed" response decreases. Rather than offer prescriptive advice regarding this trend, we would simply suggest that this may reflect the students' perceptions of psychology in these lower level courses. Concentration on facts and terminology would appear to have been accomplished at the expense of considering contemporary "great men." Judging from Table 4, such considerations would seem to be provided in the upper division and graduate-level courses.

Three further trends in the students' data seem worthy of elaboration. First, students in the lower division classes listed a number of tangential, "popular" psychologists, such as Joyce Brothers and Murray Banks. Second, Table 4 also reveals a degree of regionality. For example, Karl Menninger, a prominent Topeka, Kansas, psychiatrist, was consistently listed among the most important contemporary psychologists. Likewise, class instructors and other Emporia State faculty received frequent nominations. (As instructors, we may overlook how great our impact is upon our students.) Finally, as already suggested, it would appear that the responses offered by the students became more sophisticated and/or critical as one proceeds from lower level (freshman and sophomore) courses to upper level (junior, senior-graduate) courses.

The results obtained from all three phases of the present study would appear to support the contention that the number of names recognizable across all aspects of the field may be on the decline. However, this does not mean that psychology, as a profession, is without "greats." We now seem quite ready to consider those prominent figures within our respective specialty areas as having achieved the status of importance. It will be interesting to see how well these prominent figures stand the test of time. Will they be able to achieve a place of lasting importance? If so, which of those currently listed as having achieved all-time importance will they replace?

#### REFERENCE NOTE

1. Moore, M. H., & Seberhagen, L. W. Personal communication, August 18, 1967.

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