

From Theology to Theory: The History of Psychology at H-SC

Lilly A. Bauer '29

Department of Psychology, Hampden-Sydney College, Hampden-Sydney, VA 23943

Introduction

Psychology at H-SC didn't start in a lab— it started in the chapel, where early professors explored the mind through scripture before empirical evidence took the lead. Psychology, the study of the mind and human behavior, is still relatively new in the grand timeline of academia. In Hampden-Sydney's 250 years, psychology has only "existed" since the 1910s, and it began to truly take shape during the 1930s to 1950s.

The growth of psychology at H-SC is a story shaped by many hands: professors who each brought their own perspectives on what it means to study the human mind. As the field evolved, so did the courses— becoming more rigorous, more experimental, and increasingly aligned with psychology's emergence as a modern science. Through interviews with both past and current faculty, this account offers a glimpse into how ideas, teaching styles, and institutional values have come together to form the psychology department we know today. To honor the legacy of psychology at H-SC, it's important to remember the people and ideas that came before us, not only to preserve our history, but to understand how far we've come, and where we can go next

Beginnings

The first records of psychology at H-SC come from 1912 with Walter J. Young. Psychology, an emerging science and philosophy had not fully separated into distinct disciplines. So, Dr. Young was a professor of philosophy, psychology, and biology. The only psychology course he taught was titled "Senses and Animal Intelligence." In this course, Dr. Young taught about early forms of classical conditioning and intelligence that could be observed behaviorally in animals.

Between 1912 and 1922, much of psychology was intertwined with bible study and theology rather than empirical science. Although there were classes on education and development, the science of psychology itself had not yet broken free from the prevailing religious perspectives on what should be taught. Today, science, with its foundation in hard facts and proven empirical theories, stands as the ultimate truth shaping our understanding of human behavior. At this time, "General Psychology" was required for graduation at H-SC, but with the intertwinement with biblical study, it was nothing like the science of today.

The first true glimpse of psychology at H-SC arrived in 1923 with Dr. Denison Maurice Allan, who served as the longest-standing psychology professor for an incredible 51 years, from 1923 to 1974. Though

he didn't publish extensively, his work left a mark on the field of personality psychology and the college. In 1947, Dr. Allan authored *The Realm of Personality*. While much of the book still leaned on ideas influenced by theology rather than empirical science, it contributed to early personality psychology by exploring Freudian concepts, motivation, and personality patterns. At the time, these ideas were foundational— and they remain central to the debate in psychology today. After all, scientists are often motivated by the challenge of disproving existing theories. Dr. Allan also dabbled in philosophy, authoring the article *Are Ideas Physical?* which serves as a reminder that philosophy and psychology have long been intertwined.

For at least three decades, Dr. Allan was the sole psychology professor at Hampden-Sydney, teaching general psychology as a required course for graduation. He reviewed older, often theologically-influenced literature, laying groundwork for new empirical research that would challenge or confirm his theories. While his contributions to understanding the human personality may not have revolutionized the field, his presence paved the way for a new generation of psychology professors in the 1950s and 60s, shaping the department's future.

During the 1930s to 1950s while the world struggled through the Great Depression and World War II, the psychology curriculum began to pick up speed. The importance of science in the atomic bomb spurred the exploration of all sciences. And when WWII ended, H-SC found itself establishing new majors during a period of increased enrollment.

This exploration would result in many of our modern-day psychology classes. Fundamentals (PSYC 101), along with Personality Psychology and Experimental Psychology (PSYC 250). Social psychology and abnormal psychology also quickly became integral parts of the classes offered. Educational psychology, which had been offered briefly in the 1910s, finally returned during the 1940s, allowing students at H-SC to learn about how psychology can impact classrooms.

After psychology's slow start, psychology at H-SC gained real momentum during the 1950s and 60s. In 1961, Donald Richard Ortner came to H-SC. Though he didn't produce much research, he played a major role in the college community. He helped to found the Counseling Center at H-SC, often noted as being the director of it until his retirement in 2002. He even served as the Dean of Students for seven years before devoting more time to his position as departmental chair. Classes like Industrial Psych, Guidance &

Counseling and Behaviorism became quite popular during these times with Dr. Ortner joined the college.

Dr. Ortner took a unique interest in the local impacts of the Brown v. Board of Education ruling. When Prince Edward County Schools in Farmville nearby closed for several years to resist desegregation, he studied how the loss of education affected the community. He wanted to understand how the community responded to such a crisis. Though his work is lost to history with the Negro Educational Review under the title "Farmville Revisited," he was one of many looking into the topic.

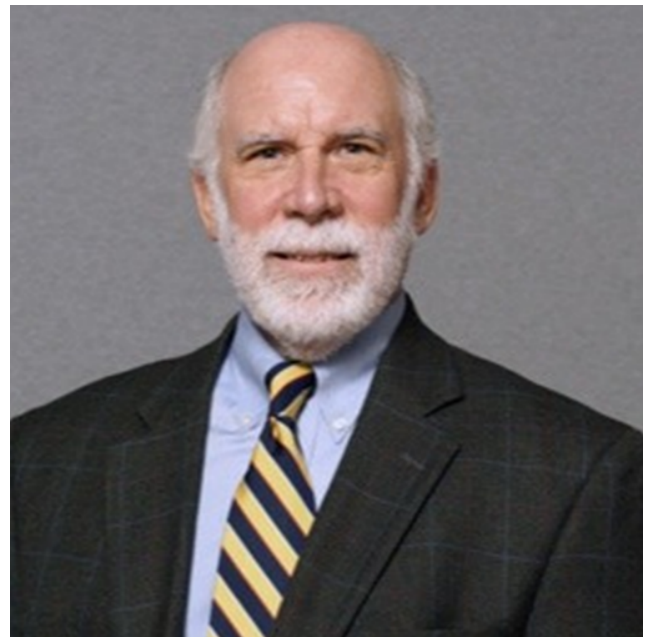
After Dr. Ortner came, Thomas E. DeWolfe soon came to Hampden-Sydney as well in 1966. He had a very unique interest in psychology, which actually goes in line with the criminal research of one of the current professors at H-SC, Dr. Vitale. In all, he studied attitude, attraction, and criminal psychology from a clinical point of view. Dr. DeWolfe studied moral reasoning and moral character differences in gender for incarcerated factors. His work on this was published in 1988 and garnered 57 citations!

Other professors like Dr. Jack Lancaster Mason (serving for only 4 years), and Dr. Frank James Simes (serving from 1967-2001) had no additional information on them. While Dr. Simes was an administrative vice president and former academic dean, he did not produce any research that is currently available. In 1978, a visiting professor named Joseph Rubinstein assisted student publishing in "Field Independence-Dependence and the Mismatch Effect" which explored whether someone views situations from the details or holistically. Combining this with the Mismatch effect where a teaching style does not align with a student's learning, we find the importance of sharing a processing style in education.

Classes now began to include some of the more popular classes that are included in today's curriculum such as developmental, learning, and physiological (sport) psychology. In 1970, there were over fifteen different classes to be taken. Special topics courses, taught by professors in the field, also started appearing.)

However, moving into modern times, there were three now retired professors that served for a long period of time till the 2020s. The first of them was Robert Herdegen, joining H-SC in 1981 and serving until 2020. He helped to implement the ever-important independent research project for the psychology major, which morphed into the Senior Seminar course, otherwise known as PSYC 450. The most popular course he taught (and his own personal favorite) was known as "Psychology of Hunger, Eating, and Food" here students explored all the effects of eating patterns and abnormalities.

Interview with Dr. Herdegen



Dr. Robert Herdegen

When first asked about his research, Dr. Herdegen replied, "My research interests have been fairly broad, and in so many cases influenced by the interests of my students." And in fact, the following research he spoke on was quite broad, with a semi-common theme of learning and motivation, however he was by no means limited by these factors.

As a graduate student, Dr. Herdegen "was focused on aversive learning processes using animal models" and the "Pavlovian fear conditioning and its role in avoidance learning in rats." While he was unable to do much research at H-SC with this due to its lack of equipment and labs to do rat research, he did find some very interesting results. When looking at "effort transfer" based on reinforcement schedule, Dr. Herdegen found that rats with a partial (intermittent) reinforcement schedule would actually run much faster down the hallway to the food lever than the rat on a continuous reinforcement schedule. This can help to reveal, as Dr. Herdegen said, "motivational mechanisms (things that influence the vigor with which we behave)" in humans as well!

The next research topic Dr. Herdegen explored how music affected exercise performance. "The ones who were listening to music rode significantly farther (about 10% farther) than the others who listened to noise or nothing at all," as he explains. Dr. Herdegen and the students he worked with also discovered that whether the music is "preferred" may moderate this effect as well. They wondered whether the music helped to "[distract] them from the discomfort

of exercising” or whether it “[elevated] their mood and thus lead to elevated performance.” They studied an “audioanalgesia” effect along this same line with pain and how music can help decrease it. In the lab, they “did find evidence supporting this pain mitigation effect in the lab.”

“Yet another broad line of research that I had students pursue was on the effect of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation,” Dr. Herdegen recalls next. This is a surprisingly popular topic in psychology as it is absolutely vital to understand how rewards, whether physical or verbal, can affect students’ intrinsic motivation. They believed, “the way in which the rewards are given” would moderate this effect. And unsurprisingly, it did! “Verbal and tangible rewards would *not* undermine intrinsic motivation if they were given to the subject for a specific high level of performance in the task,” as Dr. Herdegen replies. So, participation rewards? Bad idea according to this research if someone wants to keep intrinsic motivation alive!

An interesting line of research after this Dr. Herdegen was involved in was whether acquired motivation can predict certain patterns of affective dynamics during unpleasant or pleasant events. They did this by studying people receiving exotic body piercings. Their conclusions were that “people with no prior piercings showed pronounced negative affective reactions during the piercing and a positive affective state (relief?) piercing” and “people with several prior piercings showed a much smaller negative affective reaction during the piercing and a significantly greater positive [effect] (elation?) following the experience.” And while the results were not entirely clear, they still fell in line with hypotheses made prior.

Finally, Dr. Herdegen worked with a colleague, Dr. Mossler, and explored factors that people believed predicted college success (GPA, SAT score, etc.). They also “looked at effectiveness of these predictors for students with and without learning disabilities,” which is a surprisingly important line of research. Their results were that no single factor would predict college GPA, but a combination of them might. So it’s important for colleges to include more than a simple numerical score in their application process! Next, Dr. Herdegen was asked about the senior seminar he helped to implement. He provided more depth and background than ever, detailing how the Experimental Psychology course was the beginning of the senior seminar class as they teach research methods and more. Eventually, they had to split this course into normal and an advanced section in 1982, with the latter “having individual and/or group research projects as a central element.”

However, Dr. Herdegen felt there was something missing. He wanted students to develop their *own* research projects and get the essential

experience of following the scientific method and do “everything that any research scientist does as a matter of course.” In 1991, these two classes were combined once again with a required lab accompanying it. The advanced course evolved into a 400-level Senior Research Seminar. With the classes coming before it, students would have “experience in other courses and topics to draw on for their research ideas.” It was by 1995 that the original two-semester Senior Seminar was officially completed. The reason it was two semesters was because Dr. Herdegen thought they required time to “pursue topics of greater depth and complexity.” All of the psychology staff participated in the Senior Seminar (and still do today) to ensure an “alignment between student research interests and faculty expertise.” The current format for the Senior Seminar (PSYC 350 and 450 sequence), was implemented after Dr. Herdegen’s retirement along with Research Methods and Quantitative Methods being combined into PSYC 250 today. All courses required for a degree in psychology to this day.

When asked about *why* to do this, Dr. Herdegen insightfully replied, “I felt it was necessary for students in a scientific discipline to get real hands-on experience conducting their own research projects.” While independent study was a thing, he didn’t feel it was accessible to everyone. He wanted to ensure that psychology was on par with the other sciences. He believed that this senior seminar project would help teach “general skills that are applicable to virtually any other scientific discipline.” So while some students today may moan and whine about taking their 350-450 sequence in their senior year, there was a vital reason behind these courses: “a method of scientific thought and reasoning that is widely applicable beyond the field of psychology and HSC.”

The next question Dr. Herdegen was asked was about how psychology at H-SC may have changed students’ minds. Dr. Herdegen explains that “aha” moments were rare, but he rather saw a “gradual shift—an evolution—in their thinking and how they approached the world.” They became “more sophisticated in their scientific thinking and reasoning.” He compared it to the pickle problem: when does a cucumber stop being a pickle when placed in a jar with brine and spices? “It is a gradual transformation, and at the end is very different from how it started,” as Dr. Herdegen reiterates.

More than anything, he felt students “came away from a course questioning the assumptions they had always made prior to the course.” They found everything much more complicated, but they learned how to answer those questions. Dr. Herdegen also recalls fiercely fighting against the dreaded psychoanalytic approach and Freudian concepts that held so much vigor for far too long in psychology.

Students come in thinking personality tests like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator were perfect measures and Dr. Herdegen worked to ensure they knew such tests had little scientific evidence to support them. Truly, it's an interesting change in thinking.

Dr. Herdegen had highly unique insights into psychology's history. Both by the contributions he helped to add, and the psychology major's changes in addition to the way a student's mind could be changed dramatically through learning this science.

Dr. George Daniel Weese

Dr. George Daniel Weese began his journey at H-SC in 1989, serving for 34 years until his retirement in 2023. He is known for greatly impacting psychology and neuro-biology students with his studies into behavioral neuroscience.

He focused specifically on a location of the brain known as the "Thalamic Reticular Nucleus" which is activated when regulating the flow of sensory information to the cortex for further processing. Dr. Weese wanted to prove that the TRN also had an important role to paying attention. And in fact, he was the one to yield the first experimental data proving that very fact! He presented this research in 1999 before publishing it to the Society for Neuroscience journal. Dr. Weese often used his sabbatical semesters to continue his research on the TRN. At Duke University in 2005, he even found himself in a drug addiction study and its relation to memory formation involving rats.

As for Dr. Weese's legacy at H-SC, however, he is best known for teaching all the neuroscience classes, likely being an important reason we have a neuroscience minor at H-SC. He also taught sensation and perception along with drug behavior, which is an ever popular class. Dr. Weese is known for using humor to help students think when he taught them, prizing critical thinking through a lighter lens of humor. In addition to being the known jokester of the psychology department, he also was a psychology club sponsor. While the club no longer exists today, it was no doubt that Dr. Weese's humor attributed to it staying alive for so long.

During the 1980s, more specialized versions of what would eventually become PSYC 250 (Research Methods and Statistics) came about such as Quantitative Methods. It was at this point that labs became an essential and popular part of psychology as students participated in actual research.



Dr. George Daniel Weese

Dr. Daniel Glenn Mossler and Others

The third professor that has since retired but students might still comment on his work, is Dr. Dan Glenn Mossler. Beginning his journey in 1993 and ending in 2021, his research was extraordinary. He was a cognitive psychologist, but he studied children who had been adopted, orphaned, or abused. He wanted to see their language and cognitive outcomes, and decision-making. Though it isn't recorded, he might be viewed as a developmental psychologist. He also dabbled in college drug use and its effects on motivation and attention along with personality.

Outside of research, however, he has commented that his favorite thing about teaching has been that "it's not limited to the classroom; a lot of teaching goes on outside of the classroom. We would regularly have students over for dinner, and I think a lot of what they learned about psychology and about life came from that" ("Hampden-Sydney Icons Announce Retirement," 2021). He was an important part of the student body, known for fostering friendships with the students through racquetball and education. He held several other important positions at H-SC like chairman of the department and more, creating a lasting impact on H-SC forever.

The only remaining professors in the history of psychology at H-SC are those that still fill the halls today, creating the psychology department of modern times. Coming so far from the theology of the 1920s to empirical research and theories, the psychology department has changed dramatically over the years.

The first female psychology professor at H-SC is Dr. Jennifer Vitale, who has served as both dean and chair across campus. Starting her journey in 2003 after Dr. DeWolfe retired, she is known for doing research into criminal psychopathy and its relations to gender in addition to the attentional and emotional processes that underlie psychopathy syndrome in its entirety. Today, however, she tends to focus more on educating the student body in her unique courses on both her own area and clinical psychology.



Dr. Ganiel Glenn Mossier

Dr. Jennifer Vitale

Dr. Vitale details how the major of psychology has changed over the years she's been present first. There's been many redesigns over the years with the aforementioned senior seminar independent research project being implemented, but also the changes to even just the basic PSYC 101 course! The course was originally two semesters long with 102 following 101 before it was shortened. The reasoning? Dr. Vitale says, "You realize you don't have as much time then for students to move beyond the intro." That's the reason why the PSYC 200- and 300- courses are so important today to really go into depth on subjects that interest students! "It gives students more opportunities to go up rather than just flat," Dr. Vitale says.

After asking Dr. Vitale about specific experiences she's had with students where they had "realization moments," she had some very interesting points to make. It wasn't as stark today like students realizing empirical evidence existed, but there was a

very interesting part that Dr. Vitale said: "They just didn't think about certain questions as whether they would have an empirical basis or not." The idea of measuring these abstract concepts can be complicated especially when compared to temperature in other sciences, but that's the fun of it. In fact, this semester during Dr. Vitale's Abnormal Psychology class, she's making them do a project on how to quantify something that seems hard to quantify like "love" and how they might develop a test for it. And that's likely the wonder of psychology: we take these concepts like creativity, love, cognitive flexibility and we actually find ways to measure it validly to find patterns about our own species.

Dr. Vitale's personal experience at H-SC when she arrived, was actually quite unique as well. Despite being the first female psychology professor at H-SC, the stark difference that she tended to notice was that she was far younger than the professors there like Dr.



Dr. Jennifer Vitale

Herdegen, Dr. Weese or Dr. Mossler. And on the topic of her colleagues back then, they themselves were even more contrasting in how they interacted with students. She says that Dr. Weese, "usually had a small number of students that he worked very closely with." He preferred a "tight apprenticeship model." Dr. Mossler "always had a group of students" and always had a lab. He was the more sociable of the group, even inviting students over for dinner at his house. For Dr. Vitale, however, Dr. Herdegen always was seen as an administrative figure. In fact, she says, "So my experience with Bob was always as a model for

administration which is partly why I wound up going into administration.” But each one of them acted as a model for the “liberal arts college experience” for her. Like Dr. Mossler, she participated in plays for H-SC to interact with students outside of the classroom.

Lastly with Dr. Vitale: Her research! As she describes it, it is tricky. She worked with an incarcerated population so nowadays, she generally collaborates with professors at other universities for data. She researched attention and psychopathy specifically. But beyond that, her research interests are far broader. She describes herself as “eclectic,” as she always allows students to research what they want for their 350 and 450 projects. She’s worked with students doing personality projects, LGBTQ+ projects, microaggressions, and far more. She’s always been there to support students exploring their interests in whatever direction they end up going.

Present Day Department

Now, with that unique view from our resident clinical psychologist at H-SC, let’s look into a few more modern-day professors who continue to shape psychology at the college.

Arriving in 2017 as a past alumni, is Dr. Ivo Gyurovski. Dr. Gyurovski is the resident social psychologist of the department, researching social belonging and its effect on attention and judgement using neural correlates. Dr. Gyurovski is the current head of the psychology department as of 2024, succeeding Dr. Vitale.

The next two professors, Dr. Rebecca Bauer and Dr. Matt Locey, both arrived in the 2020’s. Dr. Bauer, a cognitive and developmental psychologist interested in creativity and imagination in children, arrived in 2022. Dr. Bauer is the one who likely hosts one of the most demanding, but rewarding labs: Developmental Psychology lab. After briefly speaking with her, she explains that the students participating will not only be included in research, but be gathering data in the nearby community for her own future research projects. The data they will be gathering is vital, however, as the area surrounding H-SC is lower in socio-economic status! Dr. Bauer is notoriously a favorite along with Dr. Vitale according to the students, as their classes are almost always the first to fill up once registration begins.

Dr. Locey, arriving in 2024, is the learning psychologist for the college. He researches self-control and social discounting, which is his most cited article, but he also does a more fun type of research for the students at H-SC interested in psychology: *rats*. Indeed, Dr. Locey is the man who researches using rats on impulsivity and far more topics. Without a doubt, the next time there’s rats present at H-SC for

his research, his lab will be the first to fill up. Classes like Dr. Locey’s reveal how psychology at Hampden-Sydney continues to connect with students, proving that the field’s appeal and importance have only grown with time.

Over the years, Hampden-Sydney has seen many kinds of people teach psychology—and countless students whose names have long since passed from record. Courses gradually grew more complex, delving into increasingly specialized topics. Over the years, these transformations have reshaped how psychology is taught at Hampden-Sydney.

At its roots, science began as simple philosophy, taught alongside theological practices. Over time, it evolved dramatically as scholars realized that even the most abstract ideas of the mind could be studied through empirical evidence. Though psychology is younger than many of the sciences at Hampden-Sydney, it remains just as vital to the College’s curriculum and identity. In the end, the story of psychology at Hampden-Sydney is still being written—by every professor, student, and question that dares to look deeper into the human mind.

Resources

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