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# At the Core of Introductory Psychology: A Content Analysis

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## Abstract

Exposure to the central ideas of the discipline is a primary pedagogical goal of introductory psychology. In this study, key concepts were identified in six introductory psychology textbooks. Of these, 377 concepts were included in at least five of six texts, forming the core of introductory psychology. If a unanimity criterion is adopted, the set is reduced to 197 concepts. These concepts were compared to lists from Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000), Landrum (1993), and Quereshi (1993). Fifty-eight concepts were common to all four studies and were unevenly distributed among the major subdisciplines within psychology. Discussion focuses on the disparity of consensus across topics, the potential theoretical and practical value in hierarchical concept analyses, and “top-down” construction of a core for introductory psychology.

Foundational concepts in psychology are introduced to “27% of all full-time students” in postsecondary institutions each year (Scheirer & Rogers, 1985), constituting an annual North American class size of more than one million adults. In part, these numbers reflect the growth in popularity and perceived value of academic psychology since it was made part of university and college curricula. Understandably, teachers of psychology and their professional organizations have expended considerable effort to set the pedagogical goals for this introduction to the topic (e.g., Gilliland, 1932; Goodwin, 1992; Irion, 1976; Sanford, 1910; Wolfle, 1942). Primary among these goals is that of imparting to students academic psychology’s orientation, guiding principles, and facts, on the assumption that there is agreement about the conceptual heart of the discipline. The present study is intended to contribute to the identification of the conceptual core of the introductory psychology curriculum.

Scrutiny of the introductory textbook is a common strategy for determining core psychology concepts. However, empirical investigations of textbook content are divided on the issue of content consistency. A number of studies employing gross measures of topic coverage (e.g., page counts devoted to a topic) in different texts at a single time point (Griggs, Jackson, & Napolitano, 1994), in the same text over time (Griggs & Jackson, 1996), and in different texts over time (Webb, 1991) give an impression of coherence and stable consensus about the introductory conceptual corpus. Other studies using similar approaches suggest a picture of variation and inconsistency (Harari & Jacobsen, 1984; Weiten, 1988). Efforts at identifying core concepts using more fine-grained analyses of index terms (Boneau, 1990; Quereshi, 1993; Quereshi & Sackett, 1977; Quereshi & Zulli, 1975), glossaries (Boneau, 1990; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000) or page-by-page content (Landrum, 1993) have led some to see convergence and coherence (Quereshi, 1993) and others to suggest that there is little compelling evidence of a sizeable set of common concepts (Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000).

A variety of methodological issues have undoubtedly contributed to the equivocal character of work in this area, including differences in chosen sets of textbooks to study; extraneous sources of content variance in the indices, glossaries, and textbook design; and variation in the criteria used for determining that a concept is common to a number of textbooks. This state of affairs leaves ample room for interpretive disagreement about the extent and nature of consensus about core concepts. Whereas Quereshi (1993) reported that recent texts were “more comprehensive and more similar to each other” (p. 220) than previously examined texts, Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000) found “evidence for incoherence rather than coherence, instability as opposed to stability...” (p. 6) when they examined Quereshi’s (1993) data.

The point of departure for the present study is the observation that however lamentably small the number, recent studies (Landrum 1993; Quereshi, 1993; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000) have nonetheless been able to identify a number of core concepts in the introductory curriculum ranging from as few as 64 (Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000) using a 100% inclusion criteria in 10 books, to 141 in 75% of 52

books (Quereshi, 1993). Landrum's (1993) finding of 126 concepts common to all six texts he reviewed falls in this range. The thrust of our approach is to explore further *where* in the introductory curriculum consensus about core concepts exists. Using a content analysis approach, we specifically sought to identify which, if any, areas in the introductory curriculum exhibit consensus about core concepts.

Two previous studies have examined concepts by topic or area. Quereshi (1993) classified 137 terms found common to 75% of 52 books into four broad areas: biopsychology, clinical psychology, learning and development, and popular psychology. The data-driven, unconventional nature of the groupings, combined with conceptual heterogeneity within the groups (e.g., the learning and development grouping included the concepts of attachment and depth perception), limits the usefulness of comparisons across topics. Psychologists and textbook authors generally agree that psychology can be divided into several major areas, for example, neuroscience, sensation-perception, and social psychology (Griggs, Jackson, & Napolitano, 1994). By ignoring these established divisions, Quereshi (1993) overlooked consensus where it did exist and placed the onus on teachers of psychology to fit his results into their classroom instruction.

Boneau (1990), on the other hand, compiled expert ratings of 200 to 250 terms under each of seven psychology subfields: abnormal behaviour, biological, cognitive developmental, history and systems, methodology and statistics, perception, and personality and social psychology. In addition to the groupings representing a somewhat "arbitrary selection of subfields" (Boneau, 1990, p. 891), the approach of soliciting ratings of what content experts think *all psychology baccalaureate students should ultimately know*, may reflect a very different sense of core concepts than introductory textbook authors have in mind. This difference is important because the amount of information the holder of a psychology degree should know would be much more extensive than the knowledge students should gain from their first psychology course. In the present investigation, topics were determined a priori using standard topics covered in introductory textbooks.

We expected our analysis of core concepts by topic to facilitate clarification of what we mean by core concepts.<sup>1</sup> The notion of core concepts is used variously

in the literature to refer to a "core vocabulary" or "basic terminology" for introductory students (Quereshi, 1993; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000), important concepts introductory students should *understand* (Landrum, 1993), and concepts every *psychology baccalaureate* should know (Boneau, 1990). These seemingly subtle differences in operationalization may reflect more significant differences in what various authors have had in mind with respect to core concepts.

For instance, the notion of core concepts as shared vocabulary or basic terminology suggests glossary-like mastery of psychological terminology, which is different than viewing core concepts as building blocks. The latter, foundational sense of core concepts recognizes that some concepts are more basic (e.g., neuroscience and learning) than others to understanding a variety of psychological phenomena and thus may be viewed by introductory textbook authors as more important than others for inclusion. For example, many of the theories and concepts that comprise social psychology (e.g., attitude change) are predicated on the work of learning researchers (e.g., classical conditioning), while much of the work in sensation and perception (e.g., colour vision) is built upon theories and concepts in the study of neuroscience (e.g., occipital lobe physiology and function). We expected our content by topics analysis to shed some light on how textbook authors conceptualize core concepts through conceptual analysis of the types of concepts that emerge for each topic.

Finally, this investigation builds on earlier analyses by comparing core concepts reported previously (Landrum, 1993; Quereshi, 1993; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000) with the core concepts identified in our content analysis. Concepts found to be common to studies spanning a number of years that vary in terms of books analyzed, methodologies, and inclusion criteria, are of particular interest as we attempt to discern the core content of introductory psychology.

For our content analysis, we selected a relatively small and homogeneous set of six texts known in the publishing industry to be among the 10 top sellers for Canadian introductory psychology courses (J. Mosher, personal communication, May 3, 2002). To be as thorough as possible, we examined the textbooks on a page-by-page basis, counting as a concept all those found in headings and subheadings, boldface print, or italics, as well as concepts that were given explicit definitions. Page-by-page compilation of concepts avoids some of the shortcomings of depending on glossaries, which are at best indirect indices of authors' determinations of important concepts. For instance, Weiten (1988) reported wide variation in

1 In this study, as with those previous to it, the use of the word "concepts" refers to both concrete terms (e.g., neocortex) and more abstract conceptualizations (e.g., self-fulfilling prophecy). The need for systematic examination of level of abstraction, that is "terms" versus "concepts," is addressed in the Discussion section of this paper.

glossary sizes for 43 introductory psychology textbooks that was weakly related to the length of the book, suggesting the presence of extraneous sources of variance in determining glossary content.

In keeping with the tradition of previous studies, we will not systematically investigate the level of abstraction (i.e., highly concrete to highly abstract) of each concept under consideration. This issue will be addressed as a direction for future research in the discussion.

#### METHOD

The textbooks sampled in this study were authored by Baron, Earhard, and Ozier (1992); Carlson and Buskist (1997); Gray (1994); Myers (1998); Sternberg (1998); and Weiten (1998). These texts were chosen because they are among the better-selling texts for courses offered at Canadian universities, and thus constitute the textbook introduction to psychology for large numbers of students. They have between 16 and 20 chapters of material covered in 583 to 700 pages of text. Each text has chapters devoted to the major sub-disciplines in the field (e.g., sensation and perception) and devotes between approximately 7% and 12% of the total number of text pages to any individual chapter. The only exception to this rule of thumb is the topic of health, which was present in only five of the six texts. According to Griggs et al. (1998), these texts range from moderate to high levels of difficulty.

Concept lists were created by having two research assistants search each textbook and catalogue all concepts in a heading, subheading, boldface type, or italics, as well as those concepts given explicit definition. Glossaries, indices, and introductory chapters were not included in the search. A topic expert was consulted to determine when different concepts were used to refer to the same concept (e.g., nearsightedness and myopia).

After listing the concepts found in each text, the lists were combined to form a master list of concepts. We then counted how many of the texts examined included the concept. A concept was then defined as being "important" if it appeared in *at least* five of the six textbooks.<sup>2</sup> This cut-off was chosen because we believed that concepts not included in most of the texts analyzed were not globally important enough to the area to be included in the core terminology. Following this exercise, we compared the concepts from our final listing to those of Zechmeister and

TABLE 1  
Number of Core Concepts (Percentage) and Rank by Chapter Topic

Topic	6 of 6	Total (5+ of 6)
Sensation/Perception	39 (19.8)	73 (19.4)
	1	1
Neuroscience	28 (14.2)	53 (14.1)
	2	2
Personality	24 (12.2)	40 (10.6)
	3	3
Learning	20 (10.2)	27 (7.2)
	4	7
Abnormal	16 (8.1)	24 (6.4)
	5.5	8
Therapy	16 (8.1)	28 (7.4)
	5.5	5.5
Development	15 (7.6)	29 (7.7)
	7	4
Social	8 (4.1)	28 (7.4)
	8	5.5
Health	7 (3.6)**	13 (3.4)*
	9	10
Memory	6 (3.0)	15 (4.0)
	10	9
Consciousness	5 (2.5)	10 (2.7)
	11.5	12
Intelligence	5 (2.5)	12 (3.2)
	11.5	1.1
Emotion	2 (1.0)	3 (.8)
	14.5	16
Language	2 (1.0)	5 (1.3)
	14.5	15
Motivation	2 (1.0)	9 (2.4)
	14.5	13
Thinking	2 (1.0)	8 (2.1)
	14.5	14
Total	197	377

<sup>2</sup> In the case of health psychology, only five texts covered the topic; therefore, for a concept to be included in the core it had to be mentioned in four of the five texts.

\*For the topic of health, this value is for at least four out of five maximum texts.

\*\*For the topic of health, this value is for five out of five texts.

Zechmeister (2000), Landrum (1993), and Quereshi (1993) to ascertain the level of agreement between the four studies.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After compiling the concept lists for each textbook, we searched for those concepts that were included in five of the six texts, as well as those concepts included in all six texts. Of 6,240 total concepts, 377 concepts were in the former category and 197 concepts were contained in the latter. Results are summarized by topic in Table 1.

Our results suggest more conceptual agreement than in some earlier studies (e.g., Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000), but less than in others (e.g., Quereshi, 1993; Quereshi & Sackett, 1977; Quereshi & Zulli, 1975). The most obvious explanation for this inconsistency in outcome derives from a comparison of the inclusion criteria employed across the various studies. Quereshi and colleagues, who reported a larger number of core concepts, identified concepts as important if they occurred, on average, in 25% of the textbooks surveyed. Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000) used a relatively stringent criterion of 100% inclusion in 10 books that resulted in a much smaller core. Landrum's (1993) study yielded 126 concepts in six textbooks that were considered important enough by the raters that "any instructor might think it important" (p. 661). Our approach took a middle ground and, not surprisingly, yields intermediate results. In fact, one can see the effect of variation in criterion in our data. When we used the five of six benchmark, we obtained 377 concepts in the core. When we used the six of six benchmark, the core dropped to 197 concepts.

When the 197 concepts found to be contained in six of six textbooks are compared to the "core concept" lists constructed by Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000), Landrum (1993), and Quereshi (1993), the number of concepts shared by all four studies drops significantly. Combining the Zechmeisters' (2000) 197 concepts with Landrum's (1993) total of 251 concepts and Quereshi's (1993) 137 concepts with ours, we found 58 concepts common to all four studies, shown in Table 2.

Examination of the 58 common concepts by topic clearly indicates that core concepts are not equally distributed across the domain of psychology. In all, 24% of the concepts common to all four studies came from chapters on neuroscience and 19% from learning. Another 14% are found in abnormal and therapy chapters. Together, these three areas represent 57% of all of the core concepts. The major subdiscipline areas of developmental, personality, and social psy-

chology, each accounted for only 7%, 10%, and 9%, respectively. Perhaps most surprising is the finding that only the concept "perception" was found to be common to treatments of sensation and perception in all textbooks and studies examined.

There are several practical implications of this differential distribution of core concepts across the domain of psychology. The first of these is the issue of the amount of time spent teaching these topics. If a topic area such as neuroscience is composed of significantly more distinct core concepts than an area such as developmental psychology, does this in turn mean that significantly more time should be spent covering neuroscience in the introductory psychology classroom as opposed to dividing lecture time evenly across subdomains? In addition, should the focus of testing in introductory psychology courses include more questions based on those areas in which consensus is higher in regards to what the core concepts are? Practical issues such as these raise the more theoretical question, "Do we need to rethink what we mean by core concepts and how the type of core concept may differ across subdomains?"

Our examination of the particular concepts by topic suggests differing notions about what is meant by core concept. The neuroscience and learning concepts are, on balance, consistent with a building block or foundational sense of core concepts. In both areas, the concepts reflect basic ideas that presumably all introductory psychology students should master in order to properly understand more complex applications of basic ideas. In the case of neuroscience, this is, at least in part, due to the cumulative nature of the knowledge involved (i.e., students must understand brain structure in order to understand brain function).

Concepts and terms in these areas also form the building blocks of research in many other areas of psychology. For example, contemporary treatments of abnormal, therapy, social psychology, development, and personality are hard pressed not to make mention and use of the learning concepts listed in Table 2. Given the predominance of neuroscience and learning "stepping stone" concepts in the collection of core psychology terms, it is reasonable to conclude that the building block or foundational approach to core concepts captures best how textbook authors conceptualize these core concepts.

The developmental and personality concepts fit an historical conceptualization of core concepts. In these areas, research has progressively built upon itself over time; however, it would not be essential for a student to have any knowledge of the prior theories and ideas to understand those that follow.

TABLE 2

Fifty-eight Core Concepts Common to the Present Study and Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000), Landrum (1993), and Quereshi (1993)

ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY	conditioned stimulus	parasympathetic nervous system
anxiety	discrimination	peripheral nervous system
hallucination	extinction	sympathetic nervous system
personality disorders	learning	synapse
phobia	operant conditioning	thalamus
schizophrenia	punishment	
	reinforcement	PERSONALITY
CONSCIOUSNESS	unconditioned response	ego
hypnosis	unconditioned stimulus	id
		personality
DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY	MEMORY	psychoanalysis
attachment	long-term memory	repression
concrete operations	memory	superego
formal operations	short-term memory	
preoperational stage		SENSATION-PERCEPTION
		perception
EMOTION	MOTIVATION	
emotions	motivation	SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY
James-Lange theory		attitudes
	NEUROSCIENCE	cognitive dissonance
HEALTH	autonomic nervous system	conformity
stress	axon	social psychology
	central nervous system	stereotyping
INTELLIGENCE	cerebellum	
intelligence	chromosomes	THERAPY
	dendrites	client-centered therapy
LEARNING	hypothalamus	psychotherapy
classical conditioning	nervous system	systematic desensitization
conditioned response	neuron	

Concepts found to be common in abnormal, therapy, health, and consciousness do not fit either a foundational or historical approach, but possibly reflect a desire to address phenomena (rather than ideas) that students are already aware of and likely to be interested in. Although speculative, this possibility again is a departure from the notion of core concepts as core vocabulary. Nonetheless, it may reflect a legitimate concern on the part of authors, to treat as core, phenomena that are already part of students' experience. One possible explanation for this may involve an attempt to balance preconceived ideas about such issues as schizophrenia, hypnosis, and stress, derived from popular psychology and entertainment media treatments of these phenomena, with current scientifically based understandings.

The remaining concepts under the topics of intelligence, memory, motivation, sensation-perception, and social psychology would seem to be most amenable to the idea of core concepts as essential vocabulary or jargon, although it is noteworthy that in the case of intelligence, motivation, and sensation-perception, the consensus about the core vocabulary includes only the topic heading itself. Social psychology, on the other hand, seems to have a handful of concepts that authors believe should be part of an introductory psy-

chology student's vocabulary. These concepts, however, seem to have little to do with concerns about building block concepts or students' a priori interest in the topic. Instead, these areas appear to be concerned with topic longevity and jargon. Those concepts that appear regularly in the social psychology chapters of introductory psychology texts represent topics that have been the focus of study for decades (e.g., conformity, attitudes).

#### *Future Considerations*

Although past and present research has focused on content analyses of introductory psychology textbooks available, there are still issues to be examined. In particular, further attention should be focused on a more systematic exploration of dimensions on which concepts might differ.

To date, researchers have taken a more frequentist approach to finding the core that does not distinguish between topics and the hierarchy in which they may exist. Therefore, one of the most important dimensions to be investigated may be the influence of level of abstraction (i.e., ranging from concrete terms such as labels for parts of the brain, to more abstract conceptualizations such as cognitive dissonance theory) on the commonality of concepts. In domains where

the foundational approach is prevalent, we may expect more convergence on topic inclusion for more specific concepts and terms than for those that are more abstract. For example, structures of the eye should be more regularly included in introductory psychology texts than trichromatic theory, the idea being that you cannot fully understand the latter without the former. On the other hand, it is possible in other areas that the more general the concept is, the more convergence one will find between texts. For example, there may be more convergence on the inclusion of the topic of attitudes in a social psychology chapter than on attitude-behaviour consistency. This approach appears to fit most closely with those topic areas that reflect consensus about topics of long-standing interest to scholars in the area.

An alternative strategy would involve moving beyond content analyses and focusing instead on an expert-based system for constructing a core curriculum for introductory psychology. Such a "top-down" approach to content issues may involve having experts in a given field generate a set of core concepts for their particular topic aimed at introductory psychology texts. In this spirit, the third author, a content expert in sensation and perception, developed a prototypical table of contents on the topic, using the chapter outlines from the analysis of the six texts that formed the basis of the current study. Each chapter topic was then double-checked against this prototype to determine the number of concepts shared between the individual chapter topics and the prototype. Using a five of six criterion, there were 72 concepts contained in the prototypical chapter that were considered core concepts.

A similar exercise was carried out by the second author based on his expert area of social psychology. In that case, using a five of six criterion, 24 of the 28 core concepts from our analysis were contained in the prototypical social psychology chapter.

The content analyses that have been conducted have identified a potential problem in the teaching of concepts in introductory psychology texts. By using this expert-driven approach to the content of introductory psychology text chapters, we may change our focus from deconstructing the texts that already exist in search of an established core to becoming more proactive and allowing content experts to construct the core curriculum. This would be particularly valuable in areas identified in our analysis (e.g., perception, development) where consensus among introductory textbook authors concerning core concepts appears to be lacking. This approach would, of course, have to be tempered by the expertise of those who understand the pedagogical issues associated with

teaching introductory psychology. This partnership would be essential because what constitutes core concepts for experts in the field may not correspond to what pedagogically oriented professors of introductory psychology believe can be taught as core. Instead of continuing to debate the issue of consensus of inclusion in texts, this type of theoretical and pedagogical construction will allow us to create the kind of consistent core of terms and concepts we believe should be taught to every undergraduate introductory psychology student.

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Requests for reprints and concept lists as either hard copy, text, or rich text format files can be addressed to C.T. (Chip) Scialfa, Department of Psychology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4 (E-mail: scialfa@ucalgary.ca).

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## Résumé

La présentation des idées centrales de la discipline est le but pédagogique fondamental des cours d'introduction à la psychologie. Dans la présente étude, nous avons dégagé les concepts principaux que renferment six manuels d'introduction à la psychologie. Nous avons identifié, à partir de ces derniers, 377 concepts se retrouvant dans au moins cinq des six manuels et constituant le programme de base des cours d'introduction à la psychologie. Lorsque nous avons appliqué le critère de l'unanimité, le nombre de concepts passait à 197. Ces concepts ont été comparés aux listes tirées de Zechmeister et Zechmeister (2000), Landrum (1993) et Quereshi (1993). Cinquante-cinq concepts se retrouvaient dans les quatre études et étaient répartis de façon irrégulière entre les principales sous-disciplines de la psychologie. La discussion traite des écarts de consensus observés d'un sujet à l'autre, de la valeur théorique et pratique éventuelle de l'analyse conceptuelle hiérarchique ainsi que de la création « de haut en bas » d'un programme de base en introduction à la psychologie.

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