Ph.D. Program in Psychology:
Consciousness and Society
Department of Psychology
University of West Georgia

Program Vision

Our vision is not found in most mainstream psychology programs, but it enjoys a deep history within psychology itself. A century ago, the “father” of American psychology, William James, suggested that psychology, then a new discipline, should proceed along two complementary paths. James considered one path to be objective because it is based in neurology and behavior and yields quantifiable data. Such psychology is alive and well today and continues to generate useful results. But James (1890) argued that this approach is not fully adequate to the breadth of human experience. In addition to the study of the brain and behavior, James proposed an additional path for psychology: the study of human consciousness and experience. Another seminal figure in psychology, Wilhelm Wundt, similarly saw more than one future for psychology. Although known as the father of experimental psychology, Wundt’s notion of Volkpsychologie, with an emphasis on language, sociality, and history was one of Wundt’s unrealized dreams for the discipline (Leahey, 2000). There have now emerged methodologies and theories to address James's and Wundt’s alternative visions for psychology. Building on these seminal ideas and current developments and methodologies, our program offers a distinct perspective from which to inaugurate the study of consciousness and its social context.

Our Ph.D. program, focused on the study of Consciousness and Society, is grounded in the Department's approach to psychology as a distinctively human science. It trains scholars and practitioners at the highest level of the discipline to serve as consultants, leaders, and teachers who can affect interventions at the individual and organizational level in community, corporate, and educational settings. The program draws on two strong themes within humanistic psychology, an interest in consciousness and experience and an articulation of the broader context of sociality in the realization of human values within community.

There are three theoretical approaches to the program’s attempt to analyze the intersection of consciousness and society: Critical, Humanistic & Transpersonal. As suggested, we firstly draw on the humanistic existential foundations that have been definitive of the Department, centering around a core of classes that addresses the phenomenological grounding of consciousness; this entails drawing upon the classical texts in the discipline (e.g. William James) and relevant scholars in philosophy, cognitive science, and the neurosciences (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). This interrogation of consciousness is also informed by rising critical traditions that examine the historical position of the discipline as well as cultural representations and practices in order to understand the constitution of consciousness and the subject within institutional and social contexts. This involves a focus on Social Justice research, a tradition gaining widening influence within the field. Both the humanistic and critical traditions privilege the question of one’s subjective accounting of an event, either in experiential or discursive terms. This orientation ties these traditions to more qualitative approaches (see below). In recent years, the emphases on situated practices and embodiment have gained ground within cognitive and learning sciences and in these fields there has appeared a correlative and increasing use of qualitative research (Greeno, 1998). Our program is not precisely oriented to the same questions as these fields, but
our courses and faculties are interested in related and relevant methodological shifts (e.g. the increased use of ethnography in cognitive science). Further, we offer a more holistic and integrative approach toward consciousness and society, including an awareness of the spiritual dimensions that inform individual and community life. Such dimensions have recently become of great interest within the mainstream of the discipline (see de Angeles, 2008; Churchland, 2002) and have always been a concern within the humanistic and transpersonal subfields of psychology. This more acute sense of the place of community life for the individual also translates into our support of social justice and critical interests within psychology and dovetails with our effort to continually adjudicate the relationship between theory and praxis through, for example, training in participatory action research.

The doctoral program at University of West Georgia is not a mainstream program, but it is part of a strong movement for alternative perspectives within the discipline of psychology. We named our emphasis consciousness and society. This holistic and broadly ranging approach will draw on other disciplines (similar to current work in cognitive science) and require of us that we expose students to rigorous reflection on the relationship of culture to consciousness in terms of the discipline’s commitment to social justice and to human health as a more broadly conceived project that entails all aspects of lifestyle and “psychological variables.”

A variety of interpretative, qualitative, and case-based methods are required to address questions stemming from the study of humans in their “natural qua community” habitat (Hutchins, 1995). As we noted, such methodological approaches are thriving in cognitive science, psycho-social studies, and the learning sciences (Lave, 1988; Suchman, 2007). In keeping with these respected trends and using increasingly refined qualitative methodologies derived from social construction, critical discourse analysis, and phenomenological methods, students from our program will address issues of consciousness and society from the perspective and context of those directly affected.

We believe our focus on qualitative method is a sage and innovative choice at this juncture in psychology’s history. As many know, Division 5, the Division for Measurement, Evaluation & Statistics, has now invited qualitative researchers to join its ranks. The Division will be crafting a new name in order to indicate this broader understanding of the research process and the gaining recognition of qualitative methodologies. The British Psychological Society opened a Division on qualitative inquiry in 2005, and it is now the largest division in the BPS. Dozens of books on qualitative research have appeared in recent years, including the APA publication by Camic, Rhodes and Yardley, Qualitative Research in Psychology: Expanding Perspectives in Methodology and Design. Denzin and Lincoln’s interdisciplinary, Handbook of Qualitative Research, has been so popular that it has moved through three editions in less than a decade. A variety of new journals has also emerged, including Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology, Qualitative Health Research, Narrative Inquiry, Action Research, the Journal of Constructivist Psychology, the Qualitative Report, Forum: Qualitative Social Research, Qualitative Family Research, Discourse and Society, the International Journal of Qualitative Methods, and Discourse Studies. Interdisciplinary conferences on qualitative inquiry are now in full swing. In 2010, the 4th International Conference on Qualitative Inquiry brought together over 1,000 participants from numerous fields of study. In an essay discussing research on education, gender and science cited on the NSF website for Research on Gender in Science and Engineering (2004), Dietz, Anderson, & Katenzenmeyer, (2002) note that ethnographic research be engaged to frame and accompany broader, more quantitative or outcome oriented research, where the former provides “a rich and sophisticated analysis that can capture change in
an organizational climate (p. 404). Our focus on qualitative research should not lead the reader to believe that our students will not be exposed to the benefits of mixed methodologies.

The importance of qualitative research is also being recognized in the private and public sectors. The above paragraph contains a reference to views that spoke to research for the National Science Foundation. Approaches that analyze the interrelation of actions and persons within communities of “learning”, both within education and within business also rely upon qualitative methodologies (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Recently, the philanthropist and investor, George Soros (2008) notes that qualitative research methods can and should be considered when analyzing financial and economic behavior. Soros asserts that “social events have a different structure from natural phenomena. In natural phenomena there is a causal chain that links one set of facts directly with the next. In human affairs the course of events is more complicated. Not only facts are involved but also the participants’ views and the interplay between them enter into the causal chain” (p.7).

The focus on context and interdependence is not confined to the examination of the matrix of the social (typically conceived) and consciousness but informs our way of studying integrative health and mind/body relations. Drawing upon increasingly sophisticated understandings of the mind/body relation, we will train students how to interpret, understand, and communicate the meanings and implications of the many evidenced-based findings that support the linkage between mind and body. Too, students will gain an understanding of how to bridge the research findings in neuroscience on the subject of consciousness with subjective self-assessment, and in relationship to the person’s behavioral and broader social context.

Ultimately, our program will result in an understanding that generates new solutions to recalcitrant community problems and individual suffering. An approach based on the awareness of the researched as a subject or mutual participant in a lived context organized through social and individual meanings is especially important as we study others from a diversity of backgrounds. Calls to understand or even ask the community under study before developing interventions or research instruments have been expressed by a variety of leading experts in the field (Reid, 1993; Fine, 1996). Calls for methodological changes that respect context can been seen in the emergence of the notion of distributed cognition within cognitive science, of participant action research within the social sciences, and of a more holistic understanding of what is meant by physical or mental health. Grounded in a tradition in Psychology articulated by William James and Wilhelm Wundt, but which now possesses a greater variety of tools and perspectives to address human experience, our program will train Ph.D.s who can join the ranks of psychology departments because of their training in qualitative research, social action research, critical thinking, history and systems within psychology, and consciousness studies (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2004). Our graduates will also be prepared to join forces with projects designed to improve the relationship of the individual to his/her broader social network in a variety of organizational climates from workplace to broader communities.

Building upon decades of graduate education at the M.A. level, we are posed to join the ranks of innovative programs. Our Masters program has been internationally recognized and prosperous for its entire tenure. In our Ph.D. program, we will require a form of philosophical reflexivity that is unique in psychology programs as well as an emphasis on praxis and experience. Our curriculum will integrate a psycho-spiritual perspective, an orientation that takes in the significance of human values with innovative
research methodologies. Thus we will provide our students with the tools to look at consciousness in terms of the whole person and the broader social context.

In keeping with the above aims, the doctoral program will entail advanced course work encompassing the breadth of post-positivistic approaches to consciousness and human experience; it will explore the particular complexities of consciousness and human development in a global age, and will involve a praxis-based internship wherein course work is applied to a particular social setting, context, or issue. It will terminate with a dissertation.