

United in Science: A Developmental Framework for Growing Psychologists

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When asked why they have chosen to major in psychology, many new undergraduates claim it is because they “want to help others.” Such responses beg the question. Why *psychology*? Ideally, students have at least an implicit understanding of what distinguishes psychology from other disciplines, but given widespread misperceptions of psychology in the general population, many base their decisions on faulty information. For example, Stanovich (2007) identifies a paradoxical relationship between increased exposure to psychology in the media and how hidden the discipline remains from the public. In short, armchair philosophizing about why people do what they do abounds while psychological science is poorly understood and underappreciated. Some students lose interest upon this discovery, while others who were initially disinterested become turned on. Although psychology is an incredibly diverse discipline, two fundamental characteristics unite us: an interest in people and their well-being, and an appreciation of, if not full participation in, the science of psychology. Although some may disagree with his last point, Sternberg (1997) notes in the preface to his edited book on careers in psychology that “Psychology is fun. It helps people, advances scientific and clinical understanding, and pays relatively well” (pg. 2).

The Ohio Psychological Association (OPA) promotes a balanced view of psychology stressing the importance of the relationship between science and practice. OPA’s commitment to the science of psychology in the development of students, faculty and practitioners is particularly apparent in the work of its Science Committee. In this article, a development framework is used to help organize and review Science Committee initiatives as we illustrate the fun we have had advancing psychological science. Although the current article focuses on the work of the Science Committee, the framework applies to all, including OPA leadership, committees, and members. Readers are encouraged to use it to think about the role OPA plays in their own development, as well as the role they play in the professional development of others.

The Framework

The framework presented here is not novel; rather, it reflects OPA’s historical commitment to those it serves. The goal is to make our appreciation for development explicit in order to organize and assess our work. That is, the framework allows us to appreciate how the collective parts fit into the larger whole, thus supporting the growth and maintenance of past initiatives in addition to the development and implementation of new ones.

The basic framework can be seen in Figure 1. The central arrow extending from left-to-right denotes the developmental path of psychologists. Although even young children are intuitive psychologists, the framework begins with high school students given the pressure on them to consider, if not select, their future career path. Onto this path is layered, a series of arching arrows reflects the social context in which we help one another across development. A second layer is added in Figure 2 to demonstrate how Science Committee initiatives map onto the framework. Each layer is described below.

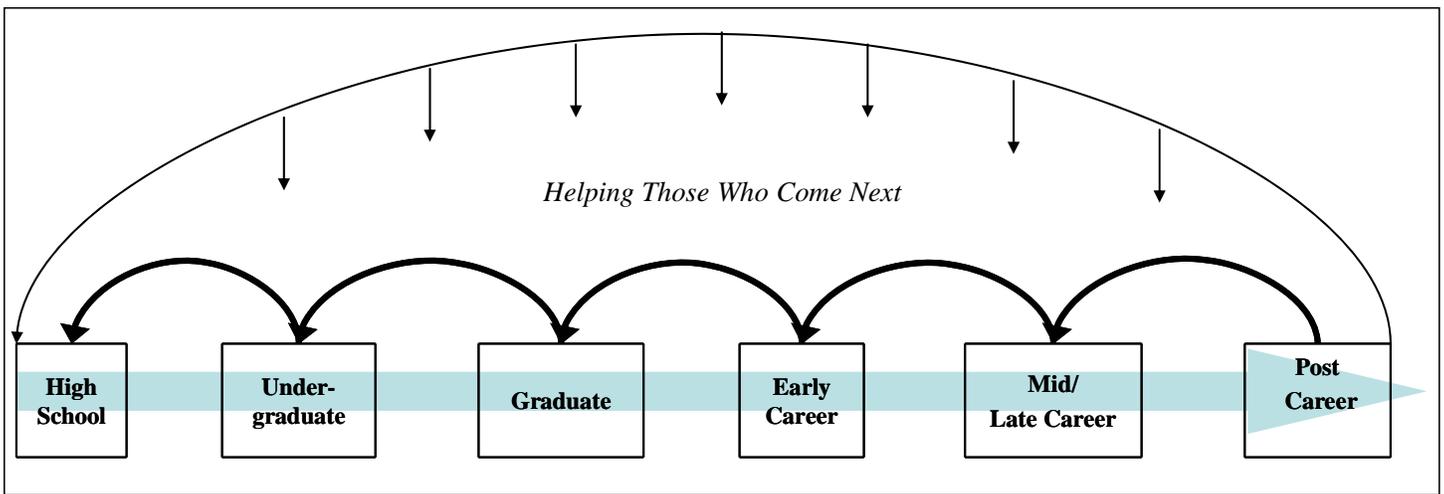


Figure 1. Social context: A developmental framework for organizing and assessing OPA initiatives.

Layer 1: Social context. The first layer was inspired by two ideas: the prisoner in Plato’s cave story and Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development. First, in the cave story a prisoner is freed from his chains and is able to escape the confines of the cave and “reality” as he knew it. Once he advances in knowledge and contemplation of truth; however, he is duty bound to return to the cave to help others.¹ Second, this layer reflects something akin to the sociocultural context Vygotsky describes in his theory of cognitive development. Simply put, children learn through their social interactions with others who have already advanced to higher levels of cognitive development, including other children as well as adults. This interaction operates on the upper limit of their “zone of proximal development,” which reflects tasks that are too difficult for them to master on their own, but ones that can be mastered with some guidance.

This duty-bound support of others attempting to reach higher levels of development is reflected in the backward-moving arrows linking each box to the one before it. The relationship is not simply unidirectional—fulfilling duty comes with personal reward/gain. For example, in his maturation model Travis (2004) notes that both supervisors and supervisees “can mature through levels of growth over time” as a function of their relationship. This bidirectional impact on professional growth and development is incredibly meaningful at each level, whether undergraduates are working with high school students or psychologists in late career are supporting those early in their careers. Furthermore, as we progress to the more advanced points in development, the pool of others for whom we are responsible increases, which is illustrated by the uppermost arrows raining down on the rest of the figure.

This basic framework may be used to organize and facilitate an understanding of the work of OPA in general or one of its committees or task forces in particular. The next section describes the work the Science Committee over the past several years.

Layer 2: Science Committee key initiatives. The Science Committee’s mission as is to “to increase the dialog between scientists and practitioners for the mutual benefit of both.” The mission is promoted and extended through several initiatives which are listed in Table 1.

¹ For the purpose of the present article, we’ll ignore the fact that the remaining prisoners were not receptive to his new-found awareness and killed him. Students and early career psychologists are generally more receptive.

Table 1
OPA Science Committee Initiatives

Initiative	Goal
Integrating Science & Practice	To promote the scientist-practitioner model
Listservs	To support the work of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * faculty at small colleges/universities * students and professionals incorporating research into their activities * secondary school psychology teachers
Need Dissertation/Research Participants?	To support data collection by students and faculty
Ohio Research Conferences	To communicate regional outlets for sharing research
Publications & Works by Ohio Psychologists	To celebrate and share the work of Ohio psychologists
Research Collaboration	To promote the collaboration between researchers and practitioners or among faculty from different institutions
Research Resources	To provide information and guidelines for conducting research and securing funds to support it
Secondary Psychology Teachers	To support the work of high school teachers
Speakers	To share expertise of local experts with others in academic and nonacademic settings
Small College Roundtable Series	To promote scholarship, faculty development, curriculum development and other topics of interest to faculty working in small colleges and universities
Small College Day at the OPA Convention (and workshop for students on grad school)	To offer workshops and opportunities for dialogue among faculty working in small colleges and universities
OPA Convention Poster Session	To provide an opportunity for students and faculty to celebrate and share their research
State Science Day (not listed on Web site)	To review and celebrate accomplishments of middle- and high-school students studying human behavior

These initiatives are represented in the framework figure as a function of their role in the professional and career development (see Figure 2). The next step, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is to assess the vitality and success of the existing projects. Furthermore, gaps and areas of redundancy become apparent with such an overview. Although it might not be appropriate for any one particular group within the association to fill every gap, it would be unfortunate to miss an opportunity where a need exists. For example, in the context of the Science Committee, there are no opportunities for undergraduates to exercise their learning in the service of high school students interested in the discipline. Such interaction would help to solve the issue identified in the opening of the article. For example, in the context of a research club, undergraduates could mentor high school students into the scientific nature of the discipline. In addition to strengthening undergraduates' understanding of psychology and science, this activity would contribute to an informed view of the discipline by younger students and their families. This activity would further support greater representation of social and behavioral science in State Science Day activities.

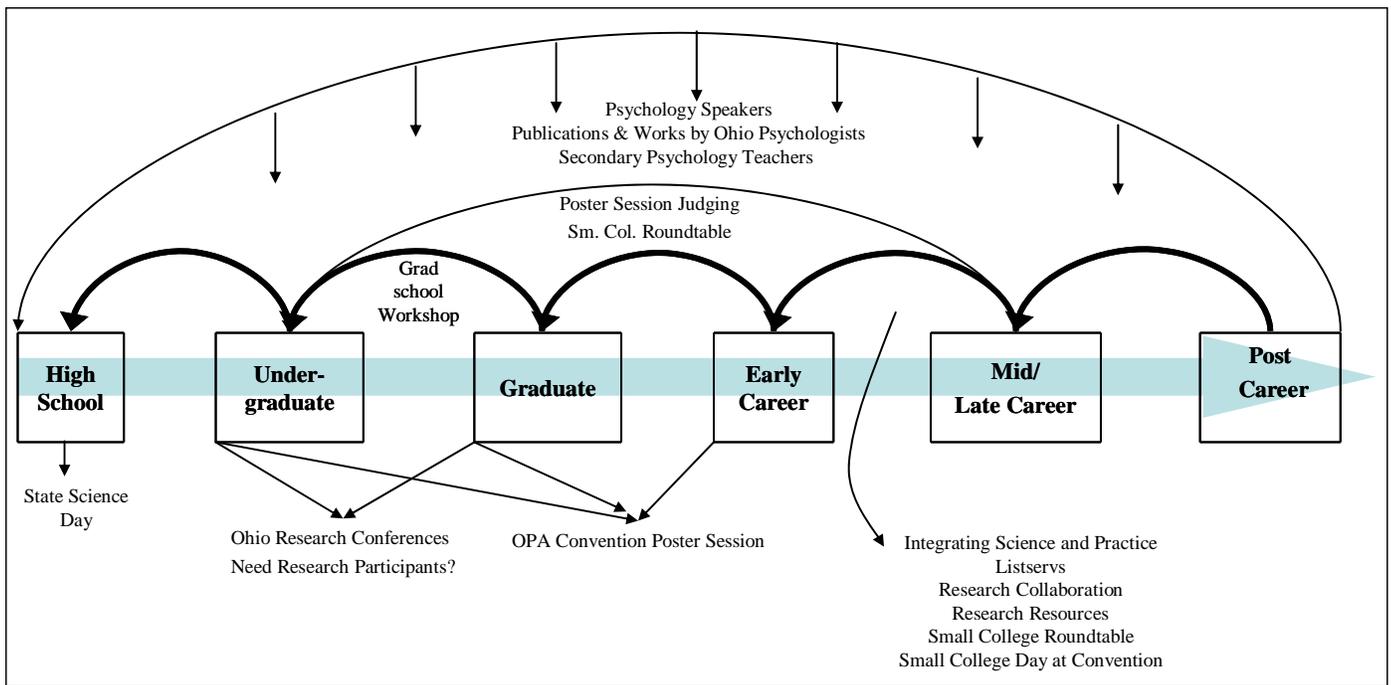


Figure 2. Science Committee initiatives layered onto the basic developmental framework.

Conclusions

The diverse subfields of psychology are united by their scientific nature. As a defining feature of the field, participating in the science of psychology should not be reserved for the professionals only, rather, collaboration across all developmental levels would serve to strengthen those growing into the field as well as foster accurate perceptions in the general population. A framework was presented to organize and assess the role OPA plays in development of its members and those it serves. The model was applied to the work of the Science Committee, which is now better positioned to assess its mission and programming. The reader is encouraged to consider two questions: How have your professional development needs been supported (or not supported) by OPA? How have you supported (or not supported) the development of those at earlier points along the developmental continuum?

About the Author: John Marazita is a professor of psychology at Ohio Dominican University, where he teaches courses on human development and cognition, supervises student research, and studies metacognition and language acquisition. Dr. Marazita is currently serving as the chair of OPA's Science Committee.

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