Surveying Psychologists' Public Image with Drawings of a "Typical" Psychologist

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Abstract

Psychologists have traditionally surveyed their public image using structured survey methods, such as specific questions and rating scales. In an attempt to assess Australian psychology's public image using a less conventional survey approach, a representative sample of adults were asked to draw pictures of what they considered a "typical" psychologist to look like. A basic content analysis of respondents' drawings (N = 119) suggested that psychologists were predominantly perceived as male, and middle-aged or older. Further perceptions to emerge are presented and discussed, along with both methodological and professional implications of the findings.

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Introduction

Psychologists have long had an interest in their public image, and have formally surveyed their public profile for over half a century. Surveys have yielded useful information on the public's attitudes towards and understanding of psychology and psychologists, both in Australia (e.g., Hopson & Cunningham, 1995) and abroad (e.g., Rosenzweig, 1999). In surveying their public image, psychologists have tended to use structured survey methods, such as specific questions and rating scales, with more qualitative research methodologies less frequently employed (see Wood, Jones & Benjamin, 1986, for a capsulised history). However, a notable exception to this is found in the work of Ehrle and Johnson (1961), who attempted to assess the public image of psychologists through the "thematic analysis" (i.e., content analysis) of published cartoons depicting psychologists. Unfortunately, despite surveying nearly five-thousand cartoons appearing in popular magazines, Ehrle and Johnson (1961) located only three cartoons portraying psychologists. They consequently concluded that the profession of psychology failed to stimulate public interest.

In building upon Ehrle and Johnson's (1961) research, this study aims to survey psychology's public image through the medium of drawing. More specifically, by having respondents complete drawings of a "typical" psychologist, and subsequently subjecting the drawings to a content analysis. In using a less conventional and less structured survey method, this study seeks to provide a unique insight into the public's perception of psychologists, thus further contributing to the existing body of research concerning psychology's public image.[1]

Method

Respondents

A total of 119 respondents (71 females, 48 males), who ranged in age from 18 to 78 years (*M* = 37.4 years), and who resided in South Australian metropolitan (73.1%) and rural (26.9%) areas, completed drawings. Most respondents came from the nine occupational categories

considered to be representative of Australian society (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997), with the top four occupational categories in the current study identical to the top four employing occupations obtained in the 1996 Australian Census (i.e., Professionals, Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers, Tradespersons and related workers, and Associate professionals). Similar standards have been used to infer a representative sample of Australian society (Sharpley, 1986).

Procedure
Data was collected by a number of trained research assistants, who approached members of the general public, explained the details of the study, and invited those approached to participate. Participation was voluntary, with subject anonymity and confidentiality emphasised. Interested respondents were supplied with a questionnaire to complete in their own time, together with a reply-paid envelope to return their surveys. Overall, 37.2% of distributed surveys were returned with completed drawings.

Materials
The questionnaire comprised three parts:

1. Demographic information (e.g., gender, age, occupation, metropolitan/rural residence).
2. Drawings of a "typical" psychologist; the questionnaire contained a section that directed respondents, "Please draw a picture of what you think the typical psychologist looks like (artistic ability is not important)". Directly below the request respondents were provided with a bordered space (12 cm x 12 cm) in which to complete their drawings.
3. A series of structured questions tapping respondents' knowledge of and attitudes towards psychology and psychologists (results reported in Hartwig & Delin, in press).

Results
Due to the infrequent use of drawings as a social research tool (Dooley, 1995), respondents' drawings were analysed in terms of basic content only. That is, drawings were analysed empirically, with the overt features in drawings (e.g., gender, age, setting) scored on a frequency count basis. No attempt was made to search for a deeper meaning in respondents' drawings.

As shown in Table 1, in terms of gender more than one-half (57.1%) of all drawings depicted the "typical" psychologist as being male. This compared to just over one-fifth (20.2%) of drawings that depicted a female psychologist. When psychologists were depicted as male, the majority (57.1%) were drawn wearing a suit and/or tie (See Figure 1 (a), (d), and (f) for examples), while just under one-quarter (24.3%) were shown with beards or goatees (e.g., Figure 1 (a)). Bald or balding psychologists were a further, albeit less common, recurring image specific to the male drawings (e.g., Figure 1 (a) and (f)). While suits were common in the drawings of female psychologists (e.g., Figure 1 (b)), females were more often shown wearing a dress or skirt (e.g., Figure 1 (c)).

Table 1. Characteristics of Drawings by Response Percentage and Number

	%	(N)
GENDER DEPICTED IN DRAWINGS		
Male	57.1	(68)
Female	20.2	(24)
Non-gender specific	21.0	(25)
Both male and female	1.7	(2)
TOTAL	100.0	(119)
AGE DEPICTED IN DRAWINGS		
Age indeterminate	59.7	(71)
Middle-aged and over	37.0	(44)
Younger than middle-aged	3.3	(4)
TOTAL	100.0	(119)
RECURRING IMAGES IN DRAWINGS		
Non-gender specific-		
Eyeglasses	45.4	(54)
Psychologist sitting behind a desk	14.3	(17)
Briefcase	8.4	(10)
Notebook or writing pad	8.4	(10)
Books and/or bookshelves	6.7	(8)
Couch	4.2	(5)
Certificates hanging on wall	3.4	(4)
Specific to males-		
Suits and/or ties	57.1*	(40)
Beards or goatees	24.3*	(17)
Bald or balding	12.9*	(9)
Specific to females-		
Dress or skirt	30.8**	(8)
Suit	26.9**	(7)

*Percentage based on total number of "Male" drawings ($N = 70$) (including "Male" drawings from drawings depicting both genders). **Percentage based on total number of "Female" drawings ($N = 26$) (including "Female" drawings from drawings depicting both genders).
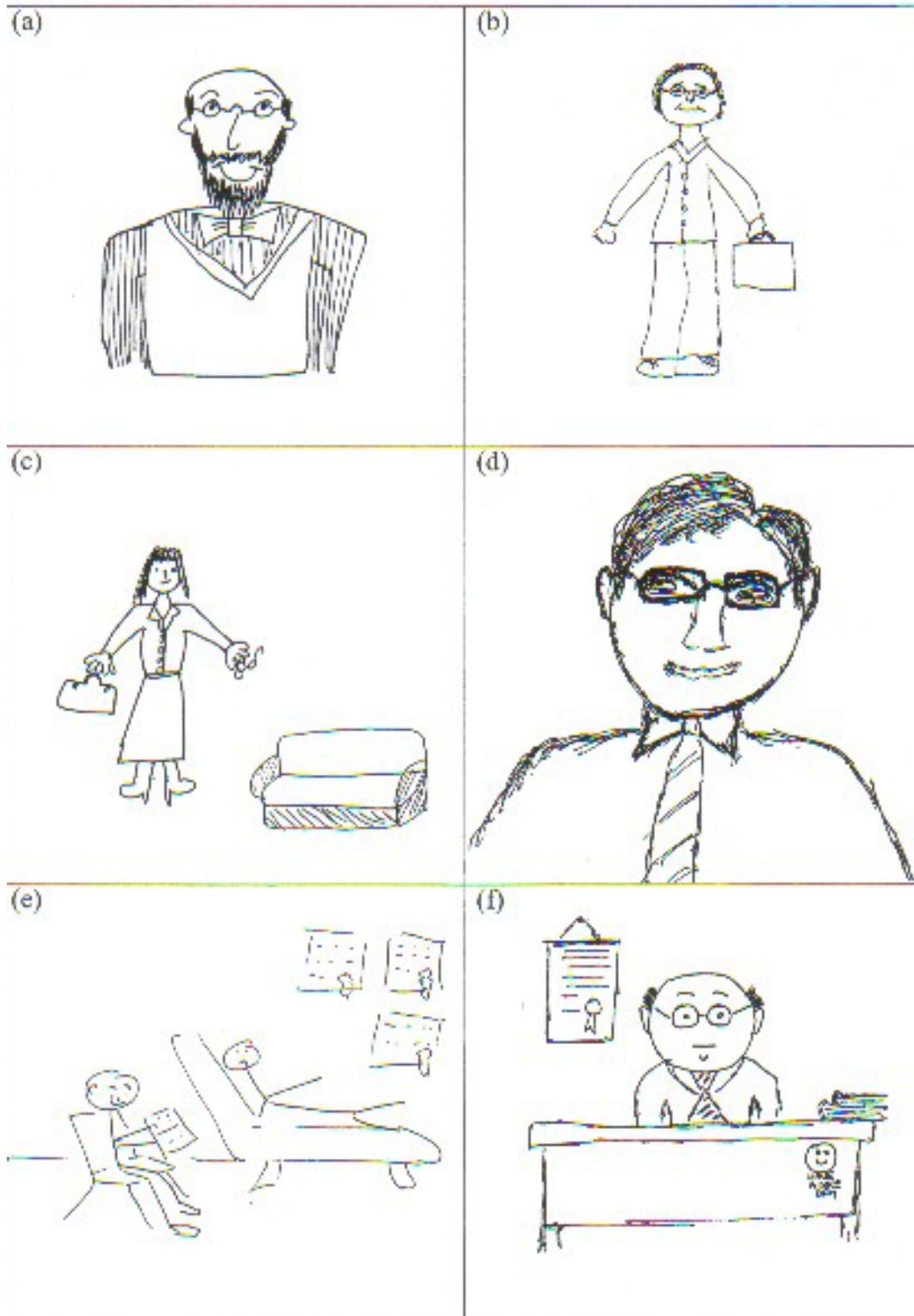
Figure 1
A Selection of Respondents' Drawings of a "Typical" Psychologist

Although the age of psychologists was indeterminate for the majority (59.7%) of drawings, over one-third (37.0%) of drawings depicted psychologists as being middle-aged or older (e.g., Figure 1 (a) and (f)). Only a small proportion of respondents (3.3%) clearly portrayed psychologists as being younger than middle-aged.

Respondents depicted a range of recurring images that were non-gender specific, occurring in drawings of both male and female psychologists. The most popular image was eyeglasses, with nearly one-half (45.4%) of all drawings depicting a psychologist wearing glasses (e.g., Figure 1 (a), (b), (d), and (f)). Most other recurring images pertained to the psychologist's work environment, such as the psychologist's desk (e.g., Figure 1 (f)), briefcase (e.g., Figure 1 (b) and (c)), notebook (e.g., Figure 1 (e)), books and/or bookshelves (e.g., Figure 1 (f)), couch (e.g., Figure 1 (c) and (e)), and certificates hanging on the office wall (e.g., Figure 1 (e) and (f)).

Discussion

Question: What do you call a person who is a middle-aged male, wears a suit, tie, and glasses, has a beard or goatee, and is bald or balding? Answer: A "typical" psychologist. Of course the above description is merely a collective of the various recurring images evident in respondents' drawings, and does not represent the image of a "typical" psychologist for all, or even the majority of respondents. That said, a number of interesting perceptions emerged in respondents' drawings, in particular relating to the age, gender, and professional expertise of psychologists.

Suggesting that psychology is seen as a predominantly male profession, nearly three times as many respondents portrayed the "typical" psychologist as being male than female. Notably, this appears to represent an inaccurate perception of psychology's gender constitution in Australia, where nearly three-quarters (71.6%) of the Australian Psychological Society's (APS) total membership is in fact female (APS, personal communication, January 29, 2002). A perception somewhat closer to reality was the apparent impression of the "typical" psychologist being an older individual. Consistent with nearly two-thirds (64.0%) of APS members being aged forty-years or older (APS, personal communication, January 29, 2002), respondents almost exclusively depicted psychologists as being middle-aged or older in drawings where age was determinable. Nonetheless, given that over one-third (36.0%) of the APS membership is aged less than forty-years, such an impression still appears to be disproportionate to the actual percentage of older psychologists in Australia.

Further interesting perceptions regarding the "typical" psychologist included the recurrent drawing of psychologists wearing suits and/or ties, as well as eyeglasses, which may be suggestive of many respondents perceiving psychology as a professional and academic occupation. Respondents' depiction of psychologists in an office setting further reinforced this impression. While such a professional impression is encouraging for the status of psychologists, it appears to represent a rather narrow view of the profession, perhaps reflecting respondents' greater familiarity with psychologists who generally work from an office setting (e.g., academic or clinical psychologists). In reality, psychologists work in a variety of other settings not implied by respondents, including organisational, educational, forensic, health, community, and sport. With respect to psychologists in Australia, for

example, collectively over one-third (38.6%) of APS Full College Members are engaged in these applied areas (APS, personal communication, January 29, 2002).

Interestingly, a similarly narrow perception was obtained in a recent American study (Barrow, 2000) that also investigated the profession's public image by having respondents complete drawings of a psychologist. In surveying a sample of predominantly female college students, Barrow (2000) found that psychologists were frequently depicted working in an office environment, as well as commonly shown wearing eyeglasses, thus further reinforcing the perception presented in the current study of psychologists being seen as office-bound academics. These common findings are particularly notable given the obvious difference in respondent demographics between studies. In order to explore just how universal this perception of psychologists is, it would be useful to survey psychologists' public image through drawings in further social settings, for example in the South Pacific region.

The main methodological limitation in this study relates to the interpretation of respondents' drawings. The infrequent use of drawings within a survey context means that more detailed interpretative guidelines have not been developed. Thus, only a limited number of inferences are permissible from the current data. Coincidentally, Barrow (2000) applied a similar scoring method to the one used in this study. Perhaps future respondents could be interviewed following the completion of drawings to further clarify the basis of their responses.

Despite interpretative caution, the current findings have highlighted a number of important community perceptions about psychologists in Australia. These include perceptions of psychologists as being predominantly male, older, and rather "academic" in orientation. This latter perception, as reinforced by Barrow's (2000) findings, suggests that the public has a limited awareness of psychologists' broad range of professional expertise. This perception is potentially concerning as it suggests that the public may not value, or take advantage of the full range of services provided by psychologists. If psychology is to continue to advance as a profession, whether in Australia or other countries within the South Pacific region, it is insufficient to graduate well-trained psychologists capable of employment in a range of settings without also providing the public with an accurate picture of the profession by way of appropriate educational programs.

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Footnotes

1. A literature search at the time when this study was conducted (1999) did not reveal any other studies that had assessed psychologists' public image through analysing respondents' drawings of psychologists. However, following this study's completion the author located a similar study recently published in the United States (Barrow, 2000). The author makes reference to this study in the Discussion section of the current paper.

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