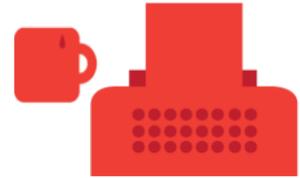


DR. WIGHT: BRAINS IN OVERALLS

Jace Bradshaw



ABSTRACT Dr. Randal Wight is a tenured professor of psychology at Ouachita Baptist University—a small liberal art, Southern Baptist university in south Arkansas. Wight joined the faculty at Ouachita Baptist University in 1986, and by 1998 he was named dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Studies—a position he held until 2003. In 2011, he was appointed the dean of the Sutton School of Social Sciences. His most recent publications are in comparative psychology, the psychology of teaching, and the history of psychology.

Q: Tell me about your education and your background in research.

A: My graduate school was in biopsychology at Memphis State, and we were still doing ablation work in the lab and a lot of histology. That ablation work was surgical because this was the early 1980's, so I was classically trained in the surgery aspect of it all.

I had assistantships with people who were making animal models of alcoholism. This is truly disgusting stuff. So I was using three groups of rats, and they were on liquid diets. One group would get the liquid diet plus alcohol. Then, the way we would test for alcoholism would be to place the rats in a cage and jingle a bunch of keys in front of them. Rats will typically have 20% autogenic seizures, but I had to run the experiment until it got to 100%. We would then 'dry out' the rats, and then re-expose them to alcohol—we mainly saw how fast the rats would go back to addictive behaviors. By the time that we got to the third series, tails were coming off. Man, I hated doing that. To tell you the truth, I kept slipping away and going to the philosophy department to sit in on other classes.

But our lab established impressive things: we established left-handedness in prosimians amongst other things. But, frankly, I hated killing animals. Hated killing animals. I loved the brain-work but didn't like how I had to get there. Loved the histology; hated the biopsies. So I am glad that Ouachita doesn't have an animal lab anymore.

But I needed to continue doing research, so I got some NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] money and went to Yale to study historiography. My first interest in this area was Robert Yerkes. He kept hand diaries and wrote lots of letters, so I spent several months publishing about him. And now most of my publications are in the history of science and pedagogy.

Q: How has education shaped your worldview?

A: So we have to go back to when I was a freshman in my undergraduate years. My roommate's parents actually found my first research paper when they were moving a few years ago. It was on weed. I was so proud of this paper. We tried so hard to have everything

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controlled. We were checking hand eye coordination, problem-solving ability, and social desirability in both knowledgeable and novice users. I'm sure my parents just threw the paper away.

But being able to ask nature a question and get an answer—not caring about the result and trying to avoid jumping into confirmation bias—that was a big deal for me. I learned to reserve judgment and to look for alternative explanations. Being careful about thinking develops good logic for me. [Human's] think because we do think, we are natural born thinkers, but we aren't. It takes practice. And I research taught me that.

Q: Research is often thought to be a dialogue. A back and forth discussion among all its participants. With that in mind, how have you changed research?

A: I don't think that I have made any major changes in the field. But I do find little things—pieces of teaching research that I have published—showing up in the oddest places. For instance, I was reading through the instructor's manual of the newest addition of the General Psych textbook, and I go crap here is something that I did. I tried to tell my wife, but she was not nearly as impressed as I was.

I have another piece of research where I looked at general psychology textbooks. I analyzed how the textbooks have changed since the late 18th century to now, and I got a good picture of how the discipline represents itself. I put it on Scholarly Commons, and it gets downloaded nine to ten times a month. I get emails and phone calls occasionally to discuss the snapshots of the discipline I exposed.

The great ones change research in great ways. But each time someone cites my work, I am creating a small influence.

[Two days later...]

Upon reflection, I would add that every empirically minded student I've turned inspired over the years is my grandest contribution to understanding's advance.

Q: Do you see the STEM initiative as positive, a negative, or even a threat in regards to your field and have you experienced any tangible change?

A: Yes I have felt threatened. It's usually the stupidest crap; usually, from people in that building [points toward natural science buildings]. I think I have a foot in both camps because of my background and I just think it's silly. Asking questions about consciousness and behavior is something that can never be replicated. So researching something like that is hard, hard work. While I acknowledge that what we do takes different techniques that squirting things in tubes and searching for ligands, I would never call what we do as 'soft' like its traditionally thought.

The STEM folks miss the mark when they bracket off science. Social media has changed the world more than any other advancement in the last ten years: warfare, news, and revolution. Understanding human social behavior is more important now than ever before because it influences our world so much faster.

I don't want to come across as anti-STEM. I love the STEM sciences, and they are

foundational to my field, but I think academics should remember that horizons are pretty large.

Q: Does a hypercompetitive research climate positively or negatively influence the quality of research?

A: Negatively. Here is why: science must be a cooperative endeavor. The image of the lone scientist in his or her lab is a Hollywood myth. So when we fight among ourselves or commit fraud, we disrespect the science. This makes us more interested the status that comes with publishing than the results. I get that there is only so much money to go around, but in my experience, that money goes further with cooperation.

Q: How long have you been wearing overalls and where is the most exciting place you have worn them?

A: Since the late years of the last century. I would have never worn this twenty years ago because I wanted out of rural Arkansas so bad. But one day I had this epiphany about why God created overalls in the first place. Pockets. Pockets. I have so much crap in my pockets [taking out keys, wallet, full-size journal, small paperback novel, and wrench]. Usually, with all this, your pants would fall off but not mine. I wear this outfit every day, so I don't have to think about it. I think smart people wear the same crap every day and I want to seem smart.

Also, I don't make much money. So I can either buy books or clothes. A cheap suit looks like a cheap suit no matter who made it, but I can buy the best overalls there are. I can buy Carhart, but I can't afford Armani. But I always wear a French-cuff dress shirt with cufflinks because I am not a hick.

I have worn these in the Vatican, in the theater in the West End, to the opera in Paris, to symphony concerts in San Chapel, and to see Helen Merrin play the Queen on Broadway.

