

PSYCHOLOGY'S GREATEST HITS

BY BOB SKIPPER

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CENTURY IS A POPULAR TIME TO REFLECT ON THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE PAST. AS THE YEAR 2000 APPROACHED, STEVEN HAGGBLOOM NOTICED THE PROLIFERATION OF "TOP-100" LISTS. DR. HAGGBLOOM, THEN A PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR AT ARKANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY, CAME UP WITH AN IDEA FOR HIS OWN LIST.

"I just had this idea that it might be kind of fun and interesting to put together a list of the most important 100 psychologists for the century," he said. "I decided to turn it into a class project. That's how most of the legwork, the gathering of the data, was accomplished."

Dr. Haggbloom, who is now head of the Department of Psychology at Western Kentucky University, picked a group of nineteen students to work on the project. "The ones who are co-authors stayed with it after the class ended," he said. The result, "The 100 Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century," was published in *Review of General Psychology* in 2002. The list has already been cited in some recent history of psychology textbooks.

What started out as a fun and interesting project turned into a groundbreaking look at a discipline that had undergone tremendous transformation in the twentieth century. And the methodology developed by Steven Haggbloom and his students proved to be unique in its own right.

Past lists dealt with a narrower slice of time, or used one measure, such as citation frequency in journals. In addition to spanning 100 years, Dr. Haggbloom's list employed three quantitative measures and three qualitative measures to rank psychologists. "The more important thing that we did that was methodologically different was that we used a

variety of measures and then tried to merge those into a single index," he said. "That was a unique feature and a more important feature in what we did."

The variables Dr. Haggbloom's study included were journal citation frequency, introductory psychology textbook citation frequency, survey response frequency, National Academy of Sciences membership, election as American Psychological Association (APA) president or receipt of the APA Distinguished Scientific Contributions Award, and surname used as a term in psychology.

The variety of measures considered helped alleviate concerns of bias because of the long time span. The team, however, struggled with the idea of giving one value more weight than another.

"That's one of the real challenging and interesting aspects of doing something like this. There's no real agreed-upon and well-developed methodology," said Dr. Haggbloom. "Most studies of eminence had used only one, maybe on occasion two measures, and so we were essentially working in the dark to come up with some way of merging all these measures together into a single index. In the end we decided to let the chips fall where they fell and not use any weighting."

The quantitative variables — journal citation, textbook citation, and survey citation frequency — were designed to help combat potential biases for American psychologists and psychologists prominent in the later part of the century. One problem was a "disappointing and inexplicably low" 5.6 percent return on a survey e-mailed to about 1,725 members of the American Psychological Society. "That's potentially problematic, but we argue that if you look at the names on those responses that came back,

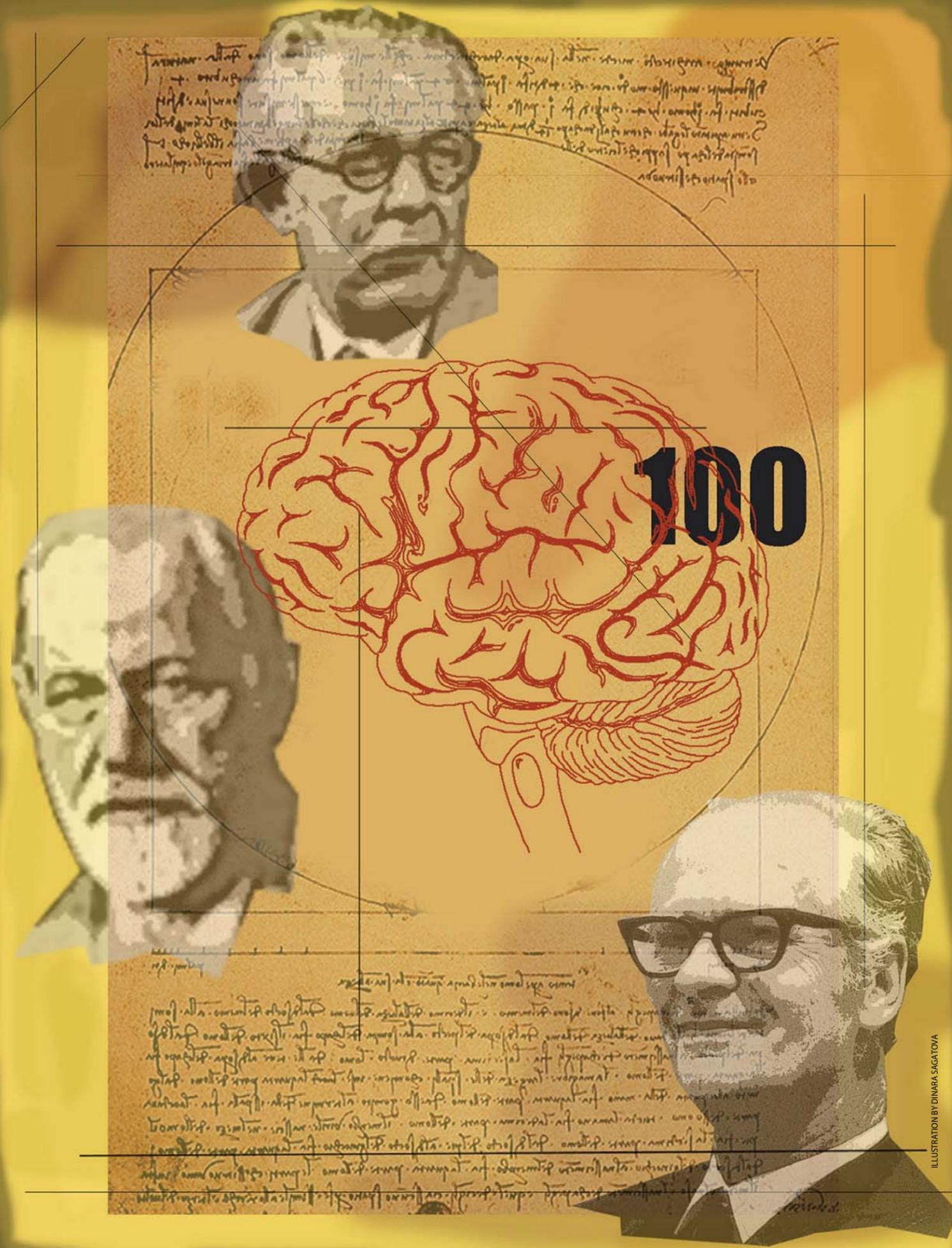


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people didn't make off-the-wall kinds of suggestions," Dr. Haggbloom explained.

These measures were used to develop a list of 219 psychologists. Researchers then applied the qualitative measures to those names. Those measures were a name used as an eponym, a term in psychology such as "Skinner Box" or "Freudian psychology," election to membership in the National Academy of Sciences, and election to the presidency of the American Psychological Association or receipt of the APA Distinguished Scientific Contributions Award.

Dr. Haggbloom said that less than 0.1 percent of APA members are elected to NAS membership. "Almost by definition, if people are in the National Academy of Sciences, they're eminent psychologists," he said.

Even so, only about 50 of the 150 or so psychologists who have been elected to NAS made the list, which may lead Dr. Haggbloom to a follow-up study of why the others did not, he said.

Because they were breaking new ground, the researchers were faced with countless "choice points" along the way. "We could have done this, or we could have done something else, so we had to make a decision about which way to go," he said. "I think that people are aware of that and they see it as something that was fun and interesting. It was fun to see who fell where on this list."

The top three, B. F. Skinner, Sigmund Freud, and Jean Piaget, are all very well known, even outside of psychology. Haggbloom elaborated, "the inclusion of Elizabeth Loftus (#58) is probably one of the more controversial aspects of the list. She is widely known for her work on the fallibility of eye-witness memory. It's a hot area, and she made the list largely because she is so heavily cited in introduction to psychology textbooks. Most of the others on the list have done work that has withstood the test of time, and I think that will be true for Loftus as well. After the list came out, Loftus' friends had a t-shirt made for her with the number 58 on it."

Dr. Haggbloom said he let the students make many of the decisions, or at least make them with his guidance. "The feedback that I got from the students was that it was a really good learning experience for them," he said. "This wasn't a research area that I had any background in, so as much as they were, I was flying by the seat of my pants. We were sort of inventing what we were going to do as we went along."

The discussions about the methodological choices they were making were beneficial to the students, he said. "It probably gave them a lot of insight into the fact that (in

research projects) there are lots of choice points where there aren't necessarily right or wrong ways to do it. But you have to think about why you would do it one particular way or use one type of methodology as opposed to something else."

The other obvious benefit is their names on the publication, he said. He called the students the "cream-of-the-crop," adding that all but one went to graduate school and all but two are now in doctoral programs.

Feedback from those on the list has been positive. Dr. Haggbloom sent the list, along with a request for biographical information, to all the psychologists on the list who were living. "I got some interesting replies back from them," he said. "Maybe the most interesting feature is that nobody who made the list thought that there was anything wrong with the methodology or that we did a bad job. They all thought it was wonderful."

No matter what methodology was used, any list would face criticism from the supporters of many great psychologists who didn't make it. Dr. Haggbloom took

a cue from one of the researchers cited in the work — Eugene Garfield — and only reported 99 of the 100 names.

"So anybody's best case he can make just might be number 100," he said, adding that even his collaborators

don't know who that is. "I won't reveal that to anyone," he said with a laugh. He is, however, considering giving clues in subsequent papers of follow-up work. "Maybe over the course of four or five papers, somebody could put all the clues together and figure it out."

Prior to becoming head of the Department of Psychology at WKU, Dr. Haggbloom spent twenty five years at Arkansas State University. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Indiana State University in Terre Haute and a doctorate from Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana.



Dr. Steven Haggbloom

PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN BOOTH

