

An apology letter to psychology students



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Ingen oppgitte interessekonflikter.

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Foto: Simone Puricelli

Dear psychology student,

Would you say you are in love with psychology? Do you wake up with a rapid heartbeat, daydreaming about what you might learn today in class? Do you consider the time you spend in class to be time well spent?

Thomas Aquinas stated, 'We cannot love what we do not know.' If you have not yet fallen in love with psychology, then we, as your professors, must be partly responsible for this lack of passion. Of course, I am not excusing you from your learning responsibilities, but that is a matter for a separate letter. The purpose of this letter is to apologise on behalf of the academic community for how the current political landscape in Norway might be affecting the quality of our psychology programmes.

Remember the moment

I would like you to cherish the memory of the moment when you fell in love with psychology and committed yourself to understand what it means to be human in the world. I hope that — sooner rather than later — you experience an 'aha' moment while reading a classic book on psychology, listening to a lecturer who deeply inspires you, or doing a project that makes you feel that you, too, can play a part in making the world a better place. A sense of fascination and curiosity about your profession will likely transform into a deep dedication to your vocation.

I aspire to be a teacher who is trusted and remembered fondly by my students, one who is accepting of their doubts and assertions while recognising their potential, in the same way as some of my professors treated me. This means I must also take ownership of the instances when I failed to sufficiently inspire you and to recognise the distress in your quiet eyes. My exhaustion from having to navigate bureaucratic matters and budget cuts, or my failure to take sufficient sick leave when I needed it, are poor excuses. I would like to reiterate the apology I made to some of you in the auditorium during one of my last classes — and in doing so extend it to all past and future psychology students throughout Norway.



When I found Lucía

I remember the exact moment when I fell in love with psychology, when my interest as a young student shifted to a deep sense of vocation. I was in a history of psychology class in my first year as an undergrad. I found some of the premises of behaviourism to be nonsense, so I asked tons of questions. Freddy, my history professor and himself a behavioral analyst, did not shut me down. He did not treat me as if I were stupid, nor did he try to convert me to his way of thinking. Instead, he merely smiled and said, 'You must talk to Lucía.' 'Why, who is she?' I asked. 'The questions you are asking are exactly the ones she has devoted her career to answering, and I'm sure you would love her class next year,' he replied.

At the time, I did not know that behaviourism had been critiqued by scholars for decades. I had not yet learned that various forms of reductionism had led to revolutions within psychology. I was clueless about the links between these revolutions, and birth the schools of thought in which many psychotherapeutic models and qualitative research methods are grounded.

Lucía used to teach existential-humanistic psychology. The weekly sessions with her during that semester flew by. Every time I left the auditorium, it was as if I now viewed the landscapes of my experience through a new and wider lens. I thought I knew something about the world I saw; yet the more I read, the hungrier for knowledge I became.

A place in an academic community

Devouring the works of Fromm, May, Frankl, and Rogers, I found solace, comfort, and motivation, and experienced many 'aha' moments. I was welcomed into an academic community at the age of 17 while still only an undergrad. I felt inspired by scholars who 'walked the talk' of empathy, presence, and congruence during the hundreds of hours I spent with Lucía and the colleagues she introduced me to in Bogotá, Buenos Aires and Lima. 'What are the odds?' I wondered with gratitude. Indeed, I, like you, also struggled to find motivation, and I occasionally lost faith in all promises for the future.

While still a fresh student, I attended my first conferences thanks to Lucía's trust and support. I stood in front of an audience, holding a microphone with my trembling hand, and talked about why reading *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry could benefit one's mental health and why I found Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* poetic. I did not care much about whether my ideas were naive, romanticised or incomplete. I experimented with my preliminary thoughts and challenged myself repeatedly to understand what psychology was about — not what the teachers told me, but what actually made sense to me.

Fast forward a few years. Another mentor, Jaan, came my way. After becoming a PhD fellow thanks to his sponsorship, I learned that Vygotsky had written a masterpiece called *The Psychology*

of Art and that, like me, he had a passion for literature. Again, I was humbled by the never-ending process of learning and practising psychology. Most of what I thought was novel had already been thought of in some form or other, and so I realised that I was not alone in my quest for academic knowledge.



Acting as a bridge

Freddy acted as a bridge to a form of knowledge I knew nothing about. He had the courage to be collegial towards Lucía and introduce us — that is, the students on his course — to humanistic psychology, a discipline he partly disagreed with.

His redirection towards the kind of scholarship he believed would align with my questions became pivotal for my career as a clinician, researcher and educator. I am therefore sorry that we, your university professors, have at times acted as a wall rather than a bridge in your learning process. This, my dear students, is the deepest wish I have for you: that you find a mentor who acts as your bridge and who believes in you while demonstrating patience, kindness, and honesty — even if that means redirecting you towards a path that is not theirs.

Whether you turn out to be a passionate behavioural analyst, psychoanalyst, neuroscientist or developmental psychologist matters little to me. My only wish is that you find out where your passion lies.

The luxury of fascination

I have spent many sleepless nights terrified by the forgetfulness of data-obsessed trends that leave the foundational premises of psychology behind, overlooking the richness of our discipline. Therefore, I feel sorry for those of you who have not yet discovered the luxury of having a fascination for theory and methodological diversity and who have not yet come to understand how these choices influence professional practices. These unfortunate misunderstandings in psychology programmes may cloud your vision of the future.

I hope you will be kinder to yourself when you feel overwhelmed by the stress of exams, and that you acknowledge that such stress can also cloud your vision. You should strive to remain curious and optimistic about what lies ahead of you, similar to how a researcher remains curious about uncertainty when carrying out a project. Be kind to your teachers, too, when voicing your discontent. We are humans just like you, and we may not have the freedom to change the systems and policies that constrain our lived experiences in our workplace. Put your discontent in context: there is a difference between the art of accusation and the art of argumentation. There is a difference between arrogance or defensiveness and humble ownership of responsibility.

Dare to find your path

In an ideal world, academia should provide you with the broadest spectrum of knowledge so that you can make informed choices as students. On behalf of all psychology scholars, I apologise for having imparted compartmentalised knowledge semester after semester. No wonder you find it difficult to understand how the knowledge you acquired can be applied to your personal life or working life. I apologise for the unanswered questions and for the information that was concealed, whether

intentionally or unintentionally, from your courses, undermining decades — if not centuries — of academic traditions within psychology that intersect with other disciplines.



I am also sorry that you were taught to believe that there were only a few sacred truths in psychology, thus leading you to assume there was nothing more to learn from the vast ocean of knowledge. As your university professors, we should be providing the coordinates of that ocean instead of immersing you in some swimming pool in a garden of our convenience.

May life provide you with generous mentors, profound readings that challenge you, and with the patience to endure the tedious but necessary aspects of academic learning. We can be passionate about something that may seem boring if we know it has a purpose. Dare to find your path, trusting that there is considerable depth and beauty yet to be discovered in the vast ocean of knowledge excluded from the sometimes arbitrary content that constitutes your curriculum.