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Why Don't They Understand Us?

A History of Psychology's Public Image

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ABSTRACT: *A history of American psychology's public image is sketched, beginning with the founding of the first psychology laboratories in the 1880s and continuing through the beginning of World War II. Topics discussed include the early public exhibitions associated with world's fairs in 1893 and 1904, the application of psychology to education, popular writings of psychologists, and newspaper coverage of the early meetings of the American Psychological Association. Relationships between psychology's public image and economic conditions and public morale in the 1920s and 1930s are emphasized. Public image problems are a long-standing issue in psychology, and reasons for the longevity of the problems are suggested.*

Senator William Proxmire has publicly ridiculed psychological research, a favorite recipient of his Golden Fleece awards; the National Institute of Mental Health has greatly curtailed funds for training in clinical psychology; the Veterans Administration has eliminated its practicum program for psychology students and substantially reduced its funding for psychology internships; the National Science Foundation (NSF) has reduced its budget for research in the behavioral sciences and removed psychology from its list of funded disciplines in its Science Education Directorate; animal rights activists have picketed psychological meetings, protesting the value of behavioral research with animals; and colleagues in the biomedical sciences have admitted in testimony before Congress that they cannot attest to the value of animal research in psychology. All these events have happened in the 1980s, and they suggest that some elements of the public, particularly the federal government, doubt psychology's value as a science, a profession, and a means of promoting human welfare. Although some of those situations have been ameliorated (e.g., the NSF has put psychology back in its Science Education Directorate), such events have caused many psychologists to conclude that the field is suffering from an image problem.

Psychologists have been studying their public image through periodic surveys beginning in the 1940s (see Wood, Jones, & Benjamin, this issue, pp. 947-953). These surveys offer a partial view of public attitudes toward and knowledge of psychology over the past 40 years. The purpose of this article is to look at the public image of American psychology in the years preceding the surveys, beginning with the founding of the earliest laboratories and continuing to the start of World War II.

The Beginning of Scientific Psychology

The 1850 edition of Webster's dictionary defined psychology as "a discourse or treatise on the human soul; or the doctrine of man's spiritual nature" (p. 886). But events that took shape in Germany altered that definition in substantial ways by moving psychology from philosophical discourse to scientific study. James McKeen Cattell and Harry Kirke Wolfe were two of the students caught in this transitional period as they worked toward their doctorates at the University of Leipzig a century ago. They graduated in 1886 and were the first two Americans to complete dissertations in psychology under the guidance of Wilhelm Wundt. Cattell returned to found the psychology laboratories at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University, and Wolfe established the laboratory at the University of Nebraska. These men believed fervently in the value of their new science. Cattell wrote to his parents that "psychology is likely to be *the* science of the next thirty years—at all events the science in which most progress will be made" (Sokal, 1981, p. 198). Wolfe made a similar claim in an 1890 letter to his university's Board of Regents, arguing for the scientific promise of psychology (Benjamin & Bertelson, 1975).

American universities were looking for faculty to teach the new approach to philosophy, even though the universities were sometimes reluctant to support requests for laboratory equipment. Adding these students of the "new psychology" to the extant departments of philosophy marked the beginnings of experimental psychology. Psychology enjoyed such success in academic settings that by 1903, only 20 years after G. Stanley Hall founded America's first psychology laboratory at Johns Hopkins University, there were nearly 50 laboratories that had produced 100 PhDs in psychology (Napoli, 1981). But few people outside academic circles appeared to have had much understanding of psychology. For example, Joseph Jastrow (1908) wrote that the public perceived psychology labs as places "for mental healing, or telepathic mysteries, or spiritistic performances" (p. 38).

The public's equation of psychology with clairvoyance, mind reading, and spiritualism was understandably disturbing to this early generation of experimental psychologists. Jastrow, of the University of Wisconsin, was concerned enough to recommend a public education campaign by psychologists. At the organizational meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA), held in Hall's home in 1892, Jastrow proposed that the Association prepare an exhibit for the Columbian World

Exhibition in Chicago. Apparently not everyone in attendance supported the idea, but those who agreed with Jastrow indicated their willingness to assist him. The exhibit, which opened in 1893, was designed to illustrate the scientific methods of psychology and to attract public attention to the new science. The displays consisted mostly of various pieces of apparatus and a number of photographs of psychological experiments and equipment. Hall supplied the photos from his labs at Clark University. There was also a testing room, where, for a small fee, individuals could have their sensory and mental capabilities measured. Hugo Münsterberg, of Harvard University, contributed some apparatus to the exhibit and may have authored a booklet on psychology for public distribution at the exposition. Not all psychologists were pleased with the publicity, however; William James is said to have referred to the exhibit with the somewhat disparaging label of "Münsterberg's Circus" (Poplestone, 1971).

If James thought the 1893 exhibit was a circus, he must have been even more chagrined by the affair Münsterberg organized in 1904 as part of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. It was a star-studded event whose public lecturers included Hall, E. B. Titchener, Mary Whiton Calkins, John B. Watson, C. Lloyd Morgan, Pierre Janet, Morton Prince, and Adolph Meyer. There were also displays of apparatus and, reflecting the growing interest in mental testing, a booth staffed by Robert S. Woodworth for public testing (Perloff & Perloff, 1977). Clearly this event was taken seriously by many of the leading figures in psychology.

These early exhibitions were significant indicators of psychologists' recognition of the need to educate the public about their new science, but it is doubtful that the exhibits did much to increase public understanding, largely because they were seen by such a limited segment of the population. No surveys of public knowledge are known to exist from that time period (the late 1890s and early 1900s), yet the comments of many psychologists writing at the turn of the century suggest they were frequently dismayed by the lack of public understanding of psychology (see Bliss, 1898; Jastrow, 1900; Royce, 1898). The event that would begin to change that situation was the movement of psychology into applied settings, especially education.

Venturing Beyond Academe

Americans studying psychology in Germany in the late 19th century often were influenced by the writings of Johann Friedrich Herbart, who urged that theories of education be based on psychology. America was ready for educational reform at that time, stimulated by new waves of immigrants, the rapid increase in manufacturing jobs as the industrial revolution continued, and the concomitant rapid growth of the cities. Education seemed fertile ground for psychology to apply its new method-

ologies. In describing the new psychology, Hall (1894) wrote, "The one chief and immediate field of application for all this work is its application to education" (p. 718). With the new experimental methods, psychology would learn all there was to know about the child—about sensory capabilities, physical characteristics, sense of humor, religious ideas, memory, play, attention span, and so forth. With this new knowledge, education would be no longer guesswork but a science. Pedagogical techniques could be planned and used in such a way as to be maximally effective for all kinds of students. Most of this applied research was part of a loosely organized but extensive program of investigations collectively labeled the "child study movement," a research program whose popularity bridged the 1890s and early 1900s (see Davidson & Benjamin, in press).

Hall was one of a handful of prominent psychologists who actively promoted the value of applied psychology. And there were others whose faith in psychology bordered on zealotry, such as Edward Wheeler Scripture, whose 1897 book, entitled *The New Psychology*, made extravagant claims for the new experimental science, especially with reference to education. However, there were prominent critics as well, including Münsterberg, whose promotional activities on behalf of psychology have already been noted. In an attack on the value of psychology for education published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Münsterberg (1898) warned teachers that

this rush toward experimental psychology is an absurdity. Our laboratory work cannot teach you anything which is of use to you in your work as teachers; and if you are not good teachers it may even do you harm, as it may inhibit your normal teacher's instincts. . . . You may collect thousands of experimental results with the chronoscope and kymograph, but you will not find anything in our laboratories which you could translate directly into a pedagogical prescription. (p. 166)

Münsterberg's article brought a flurry of responses in popular magazines from defenders of psychology's pedagogical research (e.g., Bliss, 1898; Davies, 1899; Hall, 1900). William James and James Mark Baldwin were other eminent psychologists who sided with Münsterberg, although their rhetoric was less severe. If psychologists could not agree on the value of their field for education, what was the public supposed to think? Surely the public's confusion was understandable.

Despite the disagreements, applied psychology continued its growth into other areas, including clinical practice and business and industry. Many of these applications centered around testing, whether the need was to evaluate reading problems in children or to gauge the relative effectiveness of various magazine advertisements.

Psychology and the Popular Press

Psychologists described their work for the public in the popular magazines of that day, including *Harpers*, *Forum*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Colliers*. They also wrote books for popular consumption on industrial efficiency, advertising, public speaking, selling, and other topics of public

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interest. A number of these books appeared in the first decade of the 20th century but most appeared after World War I. Prior to the war, these books, magazine articles, and public expositions were the principal sources of public information on psychology. My examination of newspaper indexes of that period indicates that newspaper coverage of psychological research was not commonplace prior to the war.

Indeed, the newspapers seemed so uninterested in psychology that coverage of the annual meetings of the APA was a rare event. The initial meeting of APA in 1892 drew a brief mention in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* ("Psychological Papers," 1892), but of the next 18 meetings (through 1910), only 5 were afforded any attention in the convention city's newspaper. In these early years APA held its annual meeting in conjunction with the Affiliated Science Societies (later the American Association for the Advancement of Science). These meetings were regularly reported in the local press, but coverage went to the older science societies, such as the Society of Naturalists and the American Chemical Society. When psychology did get some press, the image projected was not always one psychologists might have liked to see portrayed. For example, consider the following excerpt from a *New York Times* article on the 1906 APA meeting:

An experiment tending to establish the existence in rats of a sixth sense unknown to man was described to the American Psychological Association by Prof. John B. Watson of Chicago University. His recital of what he did to the rat in any other place would probably have caused a sensation. He put a rat in a box from which the only escape was by a maze, and kept it there until it was thoroughly familiar with the intricacies of the exit. Then he removed its eyes and it managed to come out all right. Smell might have guided it, so he took out the olfactory nerve. It got out again. Suggesting that this escape was due to the sense of touch the professor proceeded to freeze its feet. Still it emerged from its prison. Finally he covered its head completely with collodion and even then it threaded the maze. From these continued experiments Dr. Watson asked the section to believe that the rat must possess a sense of direction which may be shared by other animals. Psychologists differ as to the possibility of this but there are some who assert that man is not without this sense entirely. ("An Experiment," 1906, p. 5)

Following 1906, there was no newspaper coverage of the APA meetings until the 1910 meeting in Washington, D.C. After that date, reports of the meetings were a regular occurrence. This coverage included a 1916 article in the *New York Times* that reported on Hall's address in which he asserted that applied psychology could provide the means to win the war ("Sees in Psychology," 1916).

Based on the increase in newspaper coverage of psychological meetings and in the number of news stories based on psychological research, it appears that the popularity of psychology increased slightly in the years immediately prior to World War I.

Postwar Popularity

By the beginning of the 1920s, much of the American public seemed convinced that the science of psychology

held the keys to prosperity and happiness. Albert Wiggam, a nonpsychologist author of a popular newspaper column on psychology in the 1920s, was one of the forces contributing to this belief. In one of his columns Wiggam (1928) wrote:

Men and women never needed psychology so much as they need it to-day. Young men and women need it in order to measure their own mental traits and capacities with a view to choosing their careers early and wisely . . . businessmen need it to help them select employees; parents and educators need it as an aid in rearing and educating children; all need it in order to secure the highest effectiveness and happiness. You cannot achieve these things in the fullest measure without the new knowledge of your own mind and personality that the psychologists have given us. (p. 13)

Even legitimate psychologists were writing daily psychological advice columns. Jastrow's column, entitled *Keeping Mentally Fit*, was syndicated and appeared in more than 150 newspapers in the 1920s. Despite his credentials, Jastrow's columns appear to have been no more grounded in the science of his day than the popular advice columns of today are grounded in the science of our time (see Jastrow, 1928). But no matter how scientific or unscientific the advice, the public seemed eager to incorporate psychology into their lives.

Public demand for psychological services was far too great for the number of psychologists available. Not surprisingly, persons with little or no training in psychology began to offer their services as psychologists. This situation caused much concern among psychologists and led APA to establish a certification effort in the 1920s. It was fraught with problems and was discontinued after a few years, having certified a total of 25 psychologists (see Napoli, 1981).

Psychology's popularity soared after the war, primarily due to the publicity psychologists received for their war work, especially their work on military selection. Although Samelson (1977) argued that the accomplishments of psychologists during World War I were exaggerated, nevertheless, whether as a result of their war efforts or not, psychologists were enjoying a boom in popularity.

Sokal (1984) proposed that the popularity psychologists enjoyed in the 1920s was only partly due to the role they were perceived to have played in winning the war. He argued that a more important factor was the wave of self-confidence embracing America after the war. The United States had won the "war to end all wars" and found itself in good economic times, whereas much of Europe was on the verge of economic collapse.

Of course, not everyone subscribed to Wiggam's view that psychology was necessary to "secure the highest effectiveness and happiness." One of the doubters was humorist Stephen Leacock, who proposed that America was suffering from an outbreak of psychology. In a 1924 article in *Harpers* he wrote:

In the earlier days this science was kept strictly confined to the colleges. . . . It had no particular connection with anything at

all, and did no visible harm to those who studied it. . . . All this changed. As part of the new researches, it was found that psychology can be used . . . for almost everything in life. There is now not only psychology in the academic or college sense, but also a Psychology of Business, Psychology of Education, a Psychology of Salesmanship, a Psychology of Religion . . . and a Psychology of Playing the Banjo. . . . For almost every juncture of life we now call in the services of an expert psychologist as naturally as we send for an emergency plumber. In all our great cities there are already, or soon will be, signs that read "Psychologist—Open Day and Night." (pp. 471–472)

Psychologists in clinical work were breaking new ground, largely based on their postwar experiences with battle-fatigued veterans. Military contacts provided entry into a wider array of settings in business and industry than had previously been open to psychologists. But the "outbreak of psychology" was short lived. By the middle of the 1920s the clamor for psychological services seemed to have reached its peak, and by the end of the decade it was on a steep decline.

Psychology's Depression

Although many psychologists were enjoying the public attention and the increased opportunities for income, there were saner heads who cautioned the public about "pop" psychology and even apologized for the exaggerated claims being made on behalf of psychology (e.g., Dunlap, 1920; Guernsey, 1923; Watson, 1928).

Leacock's article was only one of many in the 1920s that questioned the value of psychology for society. These critical articles began to appear in the middle of the 1920s, when the business community's interest in psychology began to wane. Probably business and industry had less need for psychological services at that time because the rapid employee turnover, so common after the war, had stabilized. But it is also probable that business was becoming less satisfied with psychology because of the fraudulent practices of the many pseudopsychologists and the realization that the science of legitimate psychologists was not immediately capable of solving the problems that business faced (Sokal, 1984).

One of psychology's harshest critics in the late 1920s and 1930s was Grace Adams, who had studied psychology with Titchener at Cornell University. Her 1928 article in the *American Mercury*, entitled "The Decline of Psychology in America," was a vociferous attack on applied psychology: She argued that psychology had forsaken its scientific roots so that individual psychologists might achieve popularity and prosperity. In an article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Adams (1934) chided psychologists for masquerading as scientists when their discipline was only a groping philosophy of hope. She wrote, "for all its theories, [psychology] has performed no miracles. It has renamed our emotions 'complexes' and our habits 'conditioned reflexes,' but it has neither changed our habits nor rid us of our emotions" (p. 92).

Adams (1934) also criticized psychology for its failure to provide any help for the economic and morale problems facing America in the Depression. She noted

that psychologists had plenty to say on all social topics of the 1920s but that now, in times of trouble, they were conspicuously silent. Her views were echoed in a 1934 *New York Times* editorial that criticized psychology as the only trade or profession that had not made public its solutions to the problems of the Depression (in Napoli, 1981). There were many other critics (e.g., Stolberg, 1930) who attacked psychology from their own individual perspectives, but the unifying theme of the attacks was that psychology had promised much and delivered little.

For Adams, the silence of psychologists in the Depression was evidence of their field's lack of substance. But were psychologists silent? With respect to articles in the popular magazines, the answer appears to be that they were. A count of references to psychology in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* shows a steady decline beginning in 1929. Yet publications in psychology periodicals showed rapid growth from approximately 2,750 articles in 1927 to 6,500 articles in 1939 (Breyer, 1978). The decline of popular articles and the simultaneous increase of scientific articles in psychology is consistent with Napoli's (1981) belief that, as scholars, psychologists were content to resume their research "and watch the economists and other social scientists try to solve America's problems" (p. 64).

It is important to note that although legitimate psychology was suffering with an image problem during the Depression, the public criticisms did not prevent unqualified people from posing as psychological experts. The 1930s saw the publication of numerous self-help books in psychology, few of which were authored by psychologists or psychiatrists. James Thurber regularly attacked these books in a column he wrote for the *New Yorker* entitled *Let Your Mind Alone* (see Thurber, 1937). In addition, three popular psychology magazines began in the 1930s (*Modern Psychologist*, *Practical Psychology Monthly*, and *Psychology Digest*), but all had ceased publication by 1939.

The change in psychology's image from the high status it enjoyed in the years immediately following World War I to its decline in the Depression was a contrast that few psychologists might have anticipated. According to Samelson (1985), the war had given psychologists a taste of what could be done with their science, especially with abundant financial support. In his words, psychologists were standing on the threshold of moving from "little science" to "big science" with attendant support and prestige. But that move never really happened, at least not until the years following the next world war.

Psychology and World War II

A history of psychology's involvement in the second world war is beyond the scope of this article. (The reader interested in that topic should see Napoli, 1981, for an excellent account that is broad in its coverage.) World War II assisted psychologists in several ways. It meant new jobs, which had been scarce for psychologists in the 1930s, because of both the Depression and the diaspora of Austrian and German psychologists fleeing Hitler's regime

for America. The war also offered an opportunity for psychologists to demonstrate the value of their science to the national cause. The experiences of World War I had made psychologists better prepared, and organizational efforts for war work among psychologists were begun in 1938. That war work changed the face of psychology forever, essentially establishing psychology as a profession that could thrive outside the halls of academe. Further, the praise psychologists received from government, industry, and the military provided a tremendous boost for the public image of psychology.

The roller coaster was definitely on the way up again. But the reality of the Depression still haunted many psychologists, who worried that psychology could easily return to the problems of image and unemployment that characterized the 1930s. This fear was probably a motivating force in actions begun during the war to unify psychologists (e.g., the reorganization of APA, which was completed in 1946) in order to maximize the opportunities that lay ahead.

Conclusions

The title of this article asks the question, Why don't they understand us? The brief history provided herein has suggested a number of possible reasons. From the beginning, public confusion was a problem, as psychology sought to establish itself as an experimental discipline, independent of philosophy. Adding to this problem of the lack of public understanding were the debates among psychologists regarding the applicability of their science. Further, psychologists and persons who posed as psychologists promised more than they could deliver, a situation that fueled public distrust when accompanied by the economic woes of the Depression.

Public image is a two-dimensional issue reflecting popularity and understanding, that is, how the public feels about psychology (and psychologists) and what the public knows about psychology (and what psychologists do). Although psychology's popularity has waxed and waned, it is doubtful that the public has ever had a reasonable understanding of the nature of the field. Surveys conducted during the 40 years since World War II suggest a gradual improvement in the public image of psychology. Yet many contemporary psychologists are concerned that the current image is far from acceptable and that the science and profession of psychology continues to suffer because of that image.

Concern about public image is demonstrated by increasing references to it in the campaign statements of APA presidential candidates in recent years (e.g., see Kimble, 1985, and Zigler, 1985). Bevan (1976) argued that the public perception of psychology may reflect a general distrust of science. Shaffer (1984) said this distrust may be due to a perceived difference in worldviews: The public's animistic cosmology is in direct opposition to the public's view of psychology as mechanistic. Kimble's (1984) work on psychology's two cultures supports a similar division within psychology between scientists and hu-

manists, creating an identity problem for psychology that may be unresolvable.

Clearly the problem is long standing, as this brief history is intended to show. It should not be surprising that a change from philosophical discourse to laboratory science a little more than 100 years ago signaled significant image problems for psychology. There was much baggage to carry from philosophy, from pseudosciences such as phrenology, from association with the occult and practices of spiritualism, and from the influx of psychoanalytic theory.

Psychologists of the 1890s sought public approval and understanding through world's fair exhibitions, the promotion of applied psychology, and media coverage, principally in magazine articles. Psychologists today have more avenues to spread their message, including the powerful medium of television. Organized psychology, in the form of APA, has decided to utilize those sources for improving public understanding of psychology (Pallak & Kilburg, this issue, pp. 933-940). Perhaps the inherent nature of psychology dooms it to a life of public uncertainty. Consider some of the differences of opinion among psychologists about issues such as definitions of insanity, psychology's role in social issues, acceptable models for professional training, and the nature of practice in different specialties. Given these internal disagreements, perhaps it is unreasonable to expect the public to make sense of psychology.

The longevity of psychology's image problem might suggest that it is insoluble. And in an absolute sense it is, because the public image will never match the wishes of the profession. Still, strides can be made to improve the public's perception and understanding of psychology and thus allow psychology to play a more significant role in addressing one of its aims—promoting human welfare. The American Psychological Association is the entity best equipped to provide this public information role, through its Central Office and systematic use of its approximately 60,000 members. Recent events at APA suggest an awareness of this role and its promise for psychology and society. How much can be done remains to be seen. But without some significant campaign, psychologists should expect to continue to encounter the problems that are created by the public's current level of information.

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