The Woman Solution: A History of Women Emerging in the Field of American Psychology

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Women currently make up more than 70 percent of individuals seeking doctoral degrees in the field of psychology and represent more than 70 percent of emerging psychologists in what is now considered by many to be a female-dominated industry (Willyard, 2011). However, this was not always the case. During the development of psychology as a profession, most vocations, psychology included, were not readily open to women. Women were not granted the same educational and professional opportunities and were often thought to be better suited for a domestic sphere. Furthermore, in the history of the field of psychology, as in early history in general, the role of women has often been neglected and overlooked (Bohan, 1990; Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Yet, in spite of the numerous societal, educational, and vocational barriers at the time that psychology was being delineated as a profession, there were women who were able to distinguish themselves in the field early on and throughout its development.

The goal of this paper is to provide readers with knowledge that women played a role in the development of the field of psychology in the United States. First, the cultural influences during the time period of the early development of psychology as a distinct discipline will be reviewed. This will include a brief overview of feminist efforts during the 1800s, as well as societal views and barriers for women in the late 1800s to the early 1900s when psychology was being delineated and established as a separate profession. This will help to increase the understanding of how difficult and incredible an achievement it was for the women who were able to contribute to psychology at that time. Next, some of these specific women and their
accomplishments will be presented. While a comprehensive biography of these women and their work is beyond the present scope, hopefully readers will begin to gain an appreciation for the struggles, triumphs, and contributions of women in early American psychology.

Zeitgeist of the Times

First-Wave Feminism

First-wave feminism arose in the late 1800s to early 1900s and was primarily concerned with women’s suffrage (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). Germany had already granted women the right to vote and pressure began to build for the United States to follow suit. The National Women’s Party (NWP) organized protests, parades, and marches which were more aggressive and attention-grabbing than the quieter efforts of the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The women who participated in these efforts were met with significant resistance, and often mocked or accused of becoming masculinized for engaging in non-traditional female behaviors. However, participating women were often middle-class Caucasian women who also garnered sympathy for their ill-treatment.

While sporadic feminist efforts can be traced far back into history, the feminist movement of the United States is said to have begun in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention on Women’s Rights. There, Elizabeth Cady Stanton authored The Declaration of Sentiments to proclaim the equality of men and women and delineate strategies for asserting that equality. In addition to voting rights, another goal of the Seneca Falls Convention was to promote equal education for women. Prior to that time, women were not accepted into institutions of higher education. They did succeed in starting to open up access to higher education, and, in 1920, a constitutional amendment was passed granting women the right to vote.

Gender Differences
As feminist efforts increased, there became great concern and attention with establishing differences between the sexes. The accepted domestic sphere for women at that time held that the nature of women was pure, pious, and submissive; traits also seen as incompatible with science (Bohan, 1990). As described by G. Stanley Hall (1904), “Our modern knowledge of woman represents her as having characteristic differences from man in every organ and tissue” (p. 561). Women were described as more talkative, altruistic, socially and environmentally attuned, and having better memories, but also less able to make impartial judgments, timid, and more prone to deception. Men were described as having greater strength, speed, and accuracy, and being less easily fatigued. Physiologically, structures in the female brain (i.e. convolutions around Sylvian fissures, the island of Keil, the third frontal gyrus, and the parietal lobe) were said to be simpler and inferior to men. Women were also thought to have poorer senses of sight, touch, hearing, and pain sensitivity, but increased “affectability and nervous irritability,” (Hall, 1904, p.564).

One theory, the variability hypothesis, proposed that men drive evolutionary growth with greater variability and range in psychological and physical traits than women (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). Essentially, this belief held that females were more restricted in mental capabilities than men, likely due to their less evolved brains and primitive intellect (Bohan, 1990). As such, they were thought to be unable to reach the same levels of performance. Jastrow (1891), in his study of mental statistics, concluded that women are more similar in their thought patterns and generally less varied than men. Notable male psychologists, such as G. Stanley Hall and Edward Thorndike, promoted these misogynist beliefs, asserting that women had a limited intellect which precluded the ability for substantial academic accomplishment (Bohan, 1990).

**Education Harmful to Women’s Health**

According to Clarke (1873), “identical education of the sexes is a crime before God and
Humanity, that physiology protests against and that experience weeps over,” (p.127 as cited in Bohan, 1990). Education was thought to result in the loss of the natural naivety and femininity of women and possibly masculinize them; or conversely, feminize men in co-educational settings (Hall, 1904). There were also some questions as to whether the female menstrual cycle caused monthly impairments in their abilities and caused them to be more sickly. Furthermore, there were arguments made that providing mental stimulation would lower the general nutrition of females. Hall (1904) cited statistics that the majority of college women had a disorder of some kind, with bad health related to studying, and that 20 percent had deteriorating health while in college. Women were advised that, due to their frail nature, they should go slowly and plan periods of inactivity for about one quarter of every day.

It was thought that the frailty of women, and in particular their reproductive systems, was incompatible with the rigor of education (Bohan, 1990). According to Herbert Spencer (1867), “Deficiency in reproductive power … can be reasonably attributed to the overtaxing of [women’s] brains,” (p.485 as cited in Bohan, 1990). There was concern that educating women would ruin them as mothers and wives, perverting the natural roles which were deemed the duty of all women, and depleting energy meant for the domestic sphere (Hall, 1904). G. Stanley Hall, James Cattell, and others hypothesized that the education of women could lead to the extinction of the species, as there was a declining reproduction rate observed in educated women (Bohan, 1990). Hall (1904) even went as far as to say “Perhaps there will have to be a ‘new rape of the Sabines,’ and if women do not improve, men will have recourse to emigrant wives,” (p. 579).

**Educational and Employment Barriers**

By the late 1800s, there were several women’s colleges available in the United States, including institutions such as Smith, Vassar, Wellesley, and Wilson Colleges (NWHM, 2007).
While some women’s colleges remained closer to finishing schools, with the goal of preparing women to be good wives and mothers, others strove for a serious curriculum which would be comparable to men’s education. These institutions also offered professional opportunities for women, as the shortage of male teachers and the lower salary paid to females opened the doors for women to step into those roles. Coordinate institutions, such as the female college of Radcliffe affiliated with Harvard, and co-educational institutions began to develop. However, early co-educational institutions still had discriminatory practices and generally did not offer the same curriculum to their male and female students. For example, the female track at Oberlin College was more geared towards enhancing women’s domesticity than career preparation. In some universities women had to wait for men to be seated first, while in other universities the classes were kept segregated (NWHM, 2007). Women were also excluded from participation in extracurricular activities, collegial networks, and professional organizations (Bohan, 1990).

While changes to women’s rights afforded women more educational opportunities, there were still barriers to receiving higher education from male-dominated co-educational institutions. Many universities, like Clark, Columbia, and Harvard, would not allow women to be accepted as official students in their psychology graduate programs (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). One exception was Cornell University, a private institution founded in 1865, which admitted women as registered students and even offered fellowship support. So, while a doctoral degree was a requirement for most work in psychology, women encountered significant obstacles in obtaining entrance into doctoral programs (Bohan, 1990). These limited openings for women in graduate studies, and a lack of financial supports, often delayed women from seeking higher education following completion of their baccalaureate degrees (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). As an alternative, some women studied at home or took positions teaching to help bridge the gap.
In addition to educational barriers, women experienced discrimination and limitations in employment (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Professional work in psychology was centered in academia, but even women who completed advanced degrees found doors closed to them (Bohan, 1990). As Ladd-Franklin (1904) observed in a request for female professorships, women were not represented in academia in proportion to the number obtaining advanced education, and positions that allowed continued research were scarce. Often women had to accept positions in public schools or subordinate positions, such as research assistants and secondary authors on publications, leading to less acknowledgement or credit for their work (Bohan, 1990). Another important factor was that even female institutions did not permit married women to be members of their faculty, forcing a choice between their professional and domestic desires (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). While marriage was seen as enhancing professionalism for men, it was viewed as incompatible with professional accomplishments for women. For women who did attempt to balance marriage and work, they struggled against the social customs of domesticity reducing the time and effort available to devote to their work (Bohan, 1990).

Women Who Broke the Barriers

A frequently cited resource for identifying pioneers in the developing field of psychology is James Cattell’s (1906) publication of *American Men of Science*, a comprehensive directory of 186 individuals in the U.S. who either contributed significantly to scientific advancement or who belonged to professional organizations (as cited in Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Included in the organizations inventoried was the American Psychological Association (APA), founded in 1892 and consisting of approximately 175 members at that time. Despite the title, 12 percent (22) of the “men of science” identified as psychologists were, in fact, females. Furthermore, five
female members of the APA at that time were omitted from Cattell’s list, as well as other possible female contributors in the field (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986).

Of the women included in this publication, the earliest to graduate with a baccalaureate degree was Christine Ladd-Franklin in 1869 from Vassar College (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). The next baccalaureate degree was not issued until 1879 to Julia Gulliver from Smith College, with the remainder of the women on this list receiving their baccalaureate degrees after the 1880s. Christine Ladd-Franklin was also the first woman on this list to complete a doctoral program, completed at John Hopkins University in 1882; however, she was not awarded the degree until 1926 due to being a female. Thus, Julia Gulliver was the first woman on this list to receive her doctoral degree, obtained in philosophy in 1888 from Smith College. Mary Whiton Calkins is often credited as the first woman to complete a doctoral degree in psychology, at Harvard University in 1895, but Harvard refused to award her the degree due to being a female. As such, Margaret Washburn is officially the first woman to receive a doctoral degree in psychology, obtained from Cornell University in 1894. By 1906, 18 of these women had completed the requirements for their doctoral degrees.

The demographic characteristics of these women were found to be similar to that of their male counterparts; however, the vocational opportunities available to female psychologists were much more limited (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Only 50 percent of these women held positions of professorship or presidency at colleges or universities (versus 65 percent of the men listed), with this gap widening to 46 percent of women versus 68 percent of men when comparing the groups 15 years later. The women who were successful at obtaining these professorships were unmarried women who were largely employed at undergraduate institutions.
for women. A brief review of some of these extraordinary women, the obstacles that they overcame, and their contributions to the field will now be elaborated on individually.

**Christine Ladd-Franklin (1847 – 1940)**

Christine Ladd-Franklin initially studied science and mathematics at the then recently established Vassar College and published a number of papers on math and logic (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). One of the earliest women scientists, Ladd-Franklin would not have been permitted to attend graduate studies at John Hopkins University if a math professor there, who was impressed by her published works, had not interceded on her behalf (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Nonetheless, Ladd-Franklin was still initially denied the doctoral degree because she was a woman. She also made the maternity-over-career choice that women of her day were faced with, and as such never obtained a permanent faculty position.

Ladd-Franklin continued to pursue professional work following her marriage and studied under a number of notable figures in psychology, including G.E. Müller in Germany and Arthur König in the lab of Hermann von Helmholtz (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). There she studied color vision and developed her own theory of color vision based on evolutionary theory, which she felt enhanced existing theories (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2013). Ladd-Franklin was a strong advocate for gender equality in education and professionalism, criticizing organizations such as the American Academy of Arts and Letters and E.B. Titchener’s male-only Society of Experimentalists for not admitting women (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). In 1893, Ladd-Franklin and Mary Whiton Calkins (reviewed below) became the first female members of the APA.

**Mary Whiton Calkins (1863 – 1930)**

Mary Calkins was a pioneer in experimental and later self-psychology (O’Connell, 1980). Similar to Ladd-Franklin, Calkins experienced roadblocks to attending Harvard (Furumoto, &
Scarborough, 1986). Only following petitions from her father, which included a letter from the Wellesley College president where Calkins was teaching, was she permitted to sit in on graduate seminars. There she completed her doctoral work under William James and Hugo Münsterberg. Like Ladd-Franklin, Calkins was also denied her doctoral degree based on being a woman; but in her case, Harvard never relented. In 1902, Harvard offered to award Calkins a doctoral degree from their female institution, Radcliffe College. Despite the limitations of not having a formal doctoral degree, Calkins refused this gesture since she had earned her degree from Harvard.

Calkins taught at Wellesley College and stayed there for her entire professional career, where she was known for founding the psychology department and establishing a psychology lab (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Calkins reportedly stayed at Wellesley due to proximity to her home, where she lived with her parents and cared for them as they aged. She even turned down offers to teach graduate psychology classes at Barnard and Columbia to avoid disruption to her family. Calkins began to challenge some of the notions on gender differences, responding to Jastrow’s assertions on women’s lack of variability (Calkins, 1896). She replicated his study at Wellesley, finding more variability in her female subjects, and concluded that any differences between genders was too small to be significant and confounded by environmental factors. She was also known for her work on memory, inventing the paired-associate technique still used today, and for a personality theory focused on the self-concept (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2013). Calkins authored a number of books and publications which continued to increase her reputation and renown, and in 1905 she was elected the first female president of the APA.

**Margaret Washburn (1871 – 1939)**

Margaret Washburn was a forerunner in comparative psychology (O’Connell, 1980). She sought graduate studies at a university more hospitable to women, Cornell University, where she
was the first doctoral student of E.B. Titchener (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). As previously mentioned, in 1894 she became the first woman to receive a psychology doctorate and the third female member of the APA. Washburn started teaching at Wellesley College and then stayed on at Vassar College for 34 years. Similar to Calkins, Washburn felt her responsibility to her parents took precedence over her professional needs. Washburn was well known for her work in animal psychology, including her popular publication *The Animal Mind*, and her attempts to infer animal consciousness (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2013). Like Calkins, Washburn had a number of publications which increased her popularity and was active in several organizations. In 1921, Washburn became the second woman to be appointed president of the APA.

**Helen Thompson Woolley (1874 – 1947)**

Helen Thompson Woolley, a doctoral graduate of Chicago University in 1900, completed her dissertation work under James Angell on gender differences, directly challenging the prevailing beliefs at that time (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). Woolley reported finding more similarities than differences between the sexes, and attributed the majority of differences to environmental and social learning influences beginning from early development and continuing into adulthood. Much of Woolley’s professional work centered around child development and welfare. As the director of the Bureau for the Investigation of Working Children in Cincinnati, her research directly influenced policies for welfare reform. She then studied mental abilities in nursery school children at the Merrill-Palmer School, before moving on to become a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University and director of the Institute of Child Welfare Research.

**Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1886 – 1839)**

Leta Stetter Hollingworth, a pioneer in clinical and educational psychology, found her teaching career interrupted by a New York policy preventing women from teaching (Hergenhahn
She decided, instead, to pursue her doctoral degree at Columbia University, under advisor Edward Thorndike. Similar to Woolley, Hollingsworth used her dissertation to debunk another prevailing idea at that time regarding the perceptual and motor impairment of women during their monthly cycles (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). She concluded that there was no functional impairment found as a function of the menstrual cycles of women. Despite her advisor Thorndike’s belief in variability theory and the mediocrity of women’s intellect, he supported Hollingsworth’s work (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2013). Hollingsworth went on to support Woolley’s challenge of variability theory, conducting a number of studies to empirically disprove the theory (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). She argued that social constraints, rather than intellectual differences, impeded the professional advancement and intellectual attainment of women (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2013). Possibly due to Hollingsworth’s influence, Thorndike eventually softened his views on this topic. After obtaining her doctorate in 1916, Hollingsworth became a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she addressed educational and psychological needs of developmentally disabled and then intellectually gifted children.

These women only represent a small sample of the women contributing to the early field of psychology. Other notable women included Lillien Martin (1851 – 1943), known for her work in psychophysics with Müller, as well as research on perception, projection, and aesthetics; Milicent Shinn (1858 – 1940), who completed foundational work in developmental psychology and also argued against higher education making women unmarriageable; Kate Gordon Moore (1878 – 1963), who was involved in psychological testing, conducted considerable research on ethics, aesthetics, color vision, and later imagination, and also advocated for equal educational opportunities for women; Mary Cover Jones (1897 – 1987), an early developer in behavioral modification; and many other notable women (O’Connell, 1980). Several women who began
their studies in psychology went on to choose marriage and became ineligible for academic appointments (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). For example, Ethel Puffer (1872 - 1950) completed her baccalaureate degree at Smith and her doctoral work under Münsterberg at Harvard. She held psychology positions at Radcliffe and Simmons College, taught at Wellesley, and in 1905 published her book *The Psychology of Beauty*. Unfortunately, her career ended in 1908 when she chose to marry. Others, such as Christine Ladd-Franklin and Mary Cover Jones, were able to find a balance in choosing marriage and still engaging in professional work.

**The Struggle Continued**

The struggle and triumphs of women in the field continued past psychology’s initial inception. During World War II, the male-only Emergency Committee in Psychology (ECP) excluded women in their response to aid in the war efforts (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). Women psychologists, after finding their petitions to the ECP to be permitted to help ignored, formed the National Council of Women Psychologists (NCWP) in 1941. The organization restructured twice following the war, eventually being renamed the International Council of Psychologists and losing their original focus on promoting rights for women psychologists.

Edwin Boring (1951) addressed the professional gap whereby females attain less prestige than their male counterparts in an article he termed “*The Woman Problem*.” While reportedly attempting to collaborate with Alice Bryan in finding an agreement as to the problems faced by professional women in the field, his individual publication conveyed his own beliefs (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). Boring (1951) denied that discrimination against women was the problem, concluding instead that the discrepancies in accomplishments were due to the tendency for women to address specific, rather than general, topics in psychology and also due to the conflict between work and family obligations. He reinforced the notion that marriage benefited men
professionally, while being detrimental to women, and argued that women were unable to put in the amount of time and effort required for success. Furthermore, he indicated that a woman able to approach her work with the necessary fanaticism would likely be unmarriageable.

In the 1970s, the amount of women in the field of psychology was unchanged from the 30 percent reported in the 1930s (Unger, 2010). Many of these women also worked in applied settings, rather than academia, and were therefore poorly represented in public discourse. In 1969, another attempt was made to form an organization to address the needs of women which they felt were being ignored by the APA, including sexist practices and harassment (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). The Association for Women in Psychology (AWP) was formed and began campaigning for both reform and restitution (Tiefer, 1991). Following the urging of the AWP, the APA created a task force to address the Status of Women in Psychology. Their findings did confirm that research on women was lacking, leading to the establishment of Division 35, Psychology of Women, in 1973 to promote women’s research (Rutherford & Davis, 2008). The second wave of feminism was building around this same time, with feminist psychologists advocating for change, and a growth in the percentage of women in the field occurred (Tiefer, 1991). By 2000, approximately 67 percent of individuals obtaining doctorate degrees in psychology were female. However, despite growing numbers of women in the profession, their attainment of higher positions still lags behind men (Willyard, 2011). A study by the APA in 2009 – 2010 found that women were still paid less than men, occupied less than 50 percent of graduate psychology faculty positions, and held less than 40 percent of tenured positions.

Lagging even further behind in the contributions of women to psychology is the recognition of their efforts. Reports in the 1980s began to draw attention to the absence of women in journals and textbooks detailing the history of psychology, along with erroneous ideas
that women did not play a role in the development of the field (Furumoto, 1985). Contributions of women psychologists were often minimized, devalued, or even entirely credited to men (see examples in Bernstein & Russo, 1974). “The literature’s treatment of women psychologists… makes them invisible,” (Furumoto, 1985, p. 203). The APA citation practice of using only first initials for authors masks gender and, given the absence of women in literature and continuing cultural biases, can lead people to assume male authorship (Bohan, 1990). When attempts were made to include women, it usually took the form of compensatory history. This term, proposed by American historian and proponent of women’s history Gerda Lerner (as cited in Furumoto, 1985), refers to the attempt of historians to insert overlooked women into pre-established history. A more advanced strategy, contribution history, draws out women based on their contributions to the field, but these are still from the lens and viewpoints of what is deemed important by the men writing these histories. Furumoto (1985), from Wellesley College, highlighted the need to go further in constructing the story of the lives and identities of these important women.

The cycle of women missing from the history of psychology has continued due to their continued absence from courses teaching about this topic (Bohan, 1990). Bohan (1990) and others have continued to pursue Furumoto’s goal of incorporating women into history courses in order to remediate this oversight. She presented an example of a course using a constructivist approach to replace women back into the history of psychology and discussed options for further curriculum enhancement (Bohan, 1993). Moradi and Townsend (2006) tested the efficacy of using creative poster exercises to address the invisibility of women and found that students were more knowledgeable of contributing women and their accomplishments following the exercise. Bohan (1990) also suggested that, in addition to reshaping the teaching of history to students, there is a need to re-educate professional colleagues through sharing resources, discussions in
department meetings regarding curriculum and syllabi revisions, informal dialogues, articles and publications, and formal symposia and conferences.

Conclusion

“Women participated from the beginning in the evolution of the new discipline [of psychology],” (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986, p. 36). They were members of the APA from almost its initial establishment, contributed to original research, published in journals, and presented at meetings along with their male colleagues. These women who entered psychology at its beginnings did so against societal norms, in defiance of the traditional domestic “women’s sphere,” and in spite of educational and vocational barriers barring women entrance into many positions. Societal beliefs at that time included lingering arguments that higher education would negatively impact women’s physical health, reduce their domestic and maternal capabilities, and render them incapable of maintaining the passive, compliant, and pious role attributed to women (Furumoto, & Scarborough, 1986). Yet the successes of these pioneer women, such as Christine Ladd-Franklin, Mary Calkins, Margaret Washburn, Helen Thompson Woolley, Leta Stetter Hollingsworth, and others swiftly challenged the accuracy of these antiquated beliefs. Unfortunately, history can be thought of as socially constructed and representative of the perceptions of those writing the history. As a result, the astounding achievements of these women, who surmounted overwhelming obstacles, has become minimalized and abandoned in many historical accounts. It has now become the task of current educators to promote the woman solution by reintegrating women psychologists back into the history of psychology.
References


