

Mary Whiton Calkins: A Woman Pioneer in Psychology

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Abstract

This history of psychology poster will celebrate the first woman president of the American Psychological Association, Mary Whiton Calkins (1863-1930). She studied at Harvard under William James but was denied her Ph.D. because it was a male institution at the time. She proceeded to establish one of the country's first psychology laboratories at Wellesley College. Calkins studied the conscious self and is best known for developing the paired-associate experimental paradigm.

Mary Whiton Calkins

This history of psychology poster will celebrate the first woman president of the American Psychological Association, Mary Whiton Calkins. For the 125th anniversary of Eastern Psychological Association, we hope to present her biography and contributions to psychology.

Mary Whiton Calkins was born March 30, 1863 in Hartford, CT and died February 26, 1930 in Newton, MA.

Calkins, a first-generation American psychologist, earned her undergraduate degree in 1882 from Smith College in classics and philosophy. She then taught Greek at Wellesley College. In the late 1880's, Calkins was granted special permission to attend seminars at Harvard and studied under William James. She passed all of the requirements for a Ph.D. at Harvard with distinction, and wrote her dissertation on memory (developing the paired-associate experimental paradigm for which she is known). Because Harvard was an all-male institution at the time, she was denied her Ph.D. despite German-American Psychologist Hugo Munsterberg's report of her strong competence in their laboratory work together as well as a unanimous vote on behalf of six professors in support of her receiving a Ph.D. When she was later offered one from Radcliffe College (Harvard's associated women's college at the time), she did not accept this degree. In

1890, she also studied under Edmund Sanford, which involved training in laboratory experiments as well as conducting research on themselves to analyze the process of dreams.

Calkins began teaching psychology and established one of the country's first psychological laboratories at Wellesley College (and the first psychology laboratory for a women's college). She also published four books and hundreds of papers regarding the topics of Psychology and Philosophy. In 1905, Calkins was elected as the American Psychological Association's first woman president (the 14th president of the organization). She was later involved in a controversy involving John Watson due to her disagreement with his arguments against the concept of introspection, which led to the development of her own argument that introspection could be used as a method for studying behavior.

Calkins identified four major interests that guided much of her work in psychology: studying association, the conception of the psychic element, the concept of relational elements of experience, and her view of psychology as a science of the self. In her work studying the conscious self, she developed a theory of personalistic introspective psychology, which examined conscious, functioning, experiencing selves existing in relation to others. She published extensively in the fields of psychology and philosophy. She is best known for developing the paired-associate experimental paradigm. This involves pairing two items (typically words, a stimulus and a response), which is theorized to be a prime method of learning. This paradigm was popularly used in studies of memory and forgetting. We will present some of the key implications of this theory for current studies.

We will also present interesting facts about Mary Whiton Calkins, including that her dissertation defense was likely unsanctioned (since she was a woman), that in 1903 she ranked twelfth in a listing of fifty top-ranked psychologists, and that she was also the first woman president of the American Philosophical Association (in 1918). There appears to be a lack of discussion overall on the psychological contributions of women psychologists when compared to men, thus making it important to present on an important female figure that began these strides for women in psychology.

References

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