

PSYCHOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.†

W. BRUCE HASLAM
Weber State College

Psychology in the United States of America (USA) has grown at a very fast pace over the past century. From early beginnings the field has grown so that psychologists work in virtually every institution of higher education in the country. Psychologists work for companies, mental health agencies, other governmental agencies, and in private practice, not only in the larger cities, but also in many of the smaller cities and towns throughout the country.

Many factors have contributed to this growth of psychology. The growth of the economy has allowed for the support of our profession. The economy over the years has shifted from a primary emphasis on production of goods to a greater emphasis on the provision of services. The country has changed from a rural society to an urban society. The society has recognized that we have knowledge and skills that can be of benefit in helping with the challenges of modern living. More and more people have been able to attend universities and receive training in psychology, as well as in other areas. Over the years, the political climate has allowed for the growth of our field with only few problems. This is not to say that all politicians and all citizens accept the importance of psychology. Some have questions about its values; nevertheless, we enjoy general and positive support, or at least benign neglect, by the larger society.

The Past

Psychology in the USA began at approximately the same time as the founding of the first formal psychological research laboratory by Wilhelm Wundt in 1879 at the University of Leipzig in Germany. William James is given credit for having an informal demonstration laboratory (not a research laboratory) at Harvard University in the state of Massachusetts in the year 1875 (Boring, 1957). While the debate goes on as to who should receive first credits for various activities in those early years, James deserves much credit for helping the early psychology take hold. His book, "Principles of Psychology", published in 1890, was used widely, and to this day is recognized for its insights into human behavior.

† Trabajo presentado en el XX Congreso Interamericano de psicología (Caracas, 1985).

Many early students of psychology went to Germany to study with Wundt, and then returned to help the new psychology take root. The founding of the first formal psychological laboratory in the country is credited to G. Stanley Hall, who had studied with Wundt. This was in 1883 at John Hopkins University in the State of Maryland. The first person to be called "professor of psychology" in the USA was James McKeen Cattell, who also had studied with Wundt, and who is known for his emphasis on the basic psychological principle of individual differences. This event occurred in 1888 at the University of Pennsylvania (Atkinson, Atkinson, and Hilgard, 1983).

Initial plans for the founding of the American Psychological Association (APA) were made in G. Stanley Hall's office at Clark University in Massachusetts in 1892, where he was serving as the president of the university. That same year he became the first president of the American Psychological Association (Boring, 1957).

These early developments took place in states that are in the eastern part of the country. At that time, the eastern states were the centers of the larger population and industry. Over the decades other areas in the country have grown economically and in population. In recent years, many states in the west and southwest have been growing rapidly. In a similar fashion, psychology has spread to all areas of the country and has grown at a fast pace. This national growth and expansion has aided the progress of our field.

The functional school of psychology began to grow at approximately the turn of the century, under the leadership of John Dewey and others (Boring, 1957). This development led to an interest in applied psychology, and many psychologists began to ask how can we use our knowledge to help in such areas as education and industry. Today, many psychologists are interested in similar questions. How can we contribute to a better understanding of all people in all nations of the world? What can we do to promote peace in the world? What can we do to help people lead a better, more satisfying life? Can we help solve such problems as air pollution and traffic congestion? As the decades go by, it seems the number of such questions increases. Some psychologists are very interested in these issues, some progress is made. But with the complexities of human behavior, and the complexities of these issues, solutions are not easy to find.

Another school of psychology that began to develop in the country, about the time of the First World War, was behaviorism. John B. Watson is considered the founding father of that movement. Behaviorism has had a great impact on psychology, with its emphasis on observable responses, and on the importance of environmental learning.

During the first several decades other subfields started to develop. For example, Floyd Allport was very instrumental in promoting the growth of social psychology back in the 1920s, with the publication in 1924 of his classic textbook titled "Social Psychology".

Since the time of the Second World War, psychology in the country has grown at an almost unbelievable pace. In the mid 1940s the membership of the American Psychological Association was about 4,000. The membership now is approximately 50,000, and there may be an additional 50,000 psychologists who do not belong to the national association (Lundin, 1985). In addition, there are many thousands of people who have studied psychology and who work in a wide variety of occupations using their psychological knowledge, even though their job title is not that of psychologist.

Back in the 1940s many members of the APA believed that the association was too large. They wondered how the association could adequately serve their needs, and they wondered what the future held in store for their organization. Today, when the organization is many times larger, the same questions are asked. Many think the organization is too large and wonder how it can serve their needs. Perhaps the time has come when these questions must be answered.

The field of psychology presently contains many subfields. This diversity is reflected in the nature of APA which consists of approximately forty separate divisions consisting of members interested in such areas as the psychology of women, psychopharmacology, the law, religious issues, humanistic psychology, the arts, consulting psychology, and traditional areas such as developmental, experimental, and clinical psychology. Our field is very diverse, and the APA must be able to meet the needs of all these groups if it is to continue to grow.

Many people think that psychologists do only counseling, and that they study only abnormal behavior. Obviously, that is not true.

As psychologists, we ourselves sometimes tend to categorize the field into two broad areas, the experimental psychologists who do laboratory research, and the clinical psychologists who do counseling of some kind. Or sometimes we categorize ourselves as the academic psychologists who are primarily interested in theories and experimental research, and the clinical or applied psychologists who provide direct services to the public. While there is a measure of truth in these broad dichotomies in terms of general considerations that we may make, the study of psychology is too broad and too complex to allow for such simple dichotomies. Some psychologists identify with one viewpoint or activity within the field, but most are much more eclectic. For example in a college or university, a psychologist may teach several different classes, may do research on certain topics, and may do community services using information about even other aspects of the broad field of the study of behavior.

The trend in psychology in the country over the past thirty or forty years has been for the field to become more diversified. It seems that subfields within subfields are developing. For example, within the subfield of social psychology, the areas of person perception and prosocial behavior have developed over the past few decades, and today there is increasing interest in the application of social psychological principles to stress management and maintenance of good health practices.

Over the past two or three decades the study of behaviorism has taken a new turn with the development of behavior modification as a very applied approach for

the solutions of problems in mental hospitals, schools, industrial organizations, etc., primarily with the use of positive reinforcement when appropriate responses are made. Paradoxically with this increased use of behaviorism has come an increasing realization that behaviorism does not provide all the answers we need to understand behavior. In recent decades, cognitive psychology and humanistic psychology have grown very rapidly. Today our psychology is talking more about the importance of cognitive functions. As individuals, our thinking guides our behavior. The amount of control that we perceive we have over a situation influences our behavior. Psychology is changing from emphasizing observable responses to a greater consideration of internal cognitive processes.

Women have typically been able to play a more open role in psychology in the USA than they have in other professions such as medical doctor and lawyer (so it seems to this perhaps biased writer). In recent years the role of women in the field has expanded, as has the role of members of racial minority groups. The changes are not necessarily dramatic, but they are happening. Again, there is a parallel between changes that have occurred in the nation as a whole and changes that have occurred within our professional field. Also, as a result of these changes in our culture, there is more interest in the study of gender differences and sex roles.

As we have observed, psychology in the country has grown at a fast pace. A bachelors degree with a major in psychology is available at virtually all four-year colleges and universities in the country. A person would typically complete twelve years of schooling in the public schools, and then attend a college or university for four more years to get a degree in psychology. Graduate training is available at many schools throughout the country in many different subfields. A masters degree typically takes an additional one or two years beyond the four-year bachelors degree. A doctorate requires an additional two, three, or more years beyond the masters level, depending on the specific program. Bachelors level graduates work in a wide variety of positions, some in psychology and many in other areas where psychology is of help to them on their jobs. Masters and doctorate level graduates typically are involved in higher level professional activities. Membership in the APA requires a doctorate.

The APA publishes a wide variety of psychological journals, and many other publishers provide journals and books for psychologists. Many publishers view the psychological book market as very profitable.

The Future

What does the future hold for psychology in the country? Will the process of subdividing into many areas of interest continue? Will the number of psychologists continue to increase at a fast pace? Will the training programs continue to be available in great numbers? In all likelihood the progress will continue. The trends over the past several years have been very strong in each of these areas. But there are challenges. The political climate can change, and has changed over the past few years. Sometimes the public questions the worth of science, and its apparent emphasis on obscure details. Institutions of higher education are not growing as they once were, and some schools have had difficulty attracting sufficient students.

What other trends are occurring? Books such as "The Third Wave", by Toffler (1980) state that society is changing at a dizzying pace. Toffler suggests that the day of the "electronic cottage" may soon be with us, when many people will work at home, seated at their computer terminals. If so, this has interesting implications for psychological principles pertaining to fatigue, isolation, and attention to task.

A very popular book recently has been "Megatrends" by Naisbitt (1982). Naisbitt, in contrast to Toffler, suggests that the number of "electronic cottages" will be few, because people want to be with other people. People do not like to be alone for extended periods of time. Again, we see the intertwining of psychological principles into statements about our society, this time stressing the need for affiliation with others.

Naisbitt has written of other trends he sees in the country. He says our country will continue to change from an industrial society to one that creates and distributes information. This change is evident in many cities where old warehouses stand empty, while the computer market grows rapidly. Psychology is a field that creates and distributes information, and in that sense it fits in very well with these changes in society. On the other hand, if this transition to an information processing nation is not made successfully there could be economic problems including a reduction in the tax income that helps support the educational and other governmental institutions where many psychologists work.

Naisbitt states that the world is moving toward a global economy. The USA may not be the industrial leader of the world that it often has been considered to be in the past. The shift may affect the economy of the nation too, which in turn could have an impact on the number of psychologists the country can support. This shift to a global economy will also lead to a greater awareness of other nations than most people in the USA have at present. This change will be beneficial for psychology, as we will adopt a more worldwide view of human behavior. Psychology in the USA needs to pay more attention to cultural differences. We need to be more aware of the people who live in Latin America and other countries. We should pay more attention to developments that take place in psychology in Latin American nations and other nations, and we should share our ideas and research more with psychologists in spanish-speaking countries and the other nations of the world. With the changes taking place in our overall society, these changes will occur in psychology. these changes take time, but they do happen, and they are good for psychology on a worldwide level.

Naisbitt suggests that the population shift in the USA will continue, from northern states to southern and western states. Florida, Texas, California and other western states in particular will show great growth. These changes will continue to have an impact on where psychologists are employed, and to some extent the type of work they do.

Naisbitt states that the country is shifting from a reliance on formal institutions to self-help activities, such as neighborhood crime-watch programs. Social networks are becoming more informal, with increasing self reliance to solve

problems. In a sense , the nation is shifting to social patterns of self-reliance that have traditionally been common in Latin-America. Instead of being a threat, these changes can be beneficial to our profession as we help these changes occur, and help individuals adjust to these changes in society.

Naisbitt states that to be successful in the future, a person in the USA will have to be tri-lingual. They will have to be fluent in English, Spanish, and "computer", he says. Computer use will grow. Spanish will be necessary for citizens in the country, he says, because of the size, proximity, and economic promise of Latin America. Relationships between the USA and the Latin American nations will increase , and this will lead to greater interactions between psychologists in the nations of our hemisphere.

Psychologists in the USA have been taking more interest in applied problems in recent years. Many psychologists are very concerned about conflict resolutions and the question of what we can do to keep peace in the world. There is an increasing interest in the topic of the interaction of our psychological functioning and our physical health. What can we do to help people cope with stress, and to help them be more healthy physically as well as mentally? What can we do to help increase productivity in the work setting? How can we help the school systems? What will be the impact of computers on our lives? What of air pollution, oil shortages, changes in sex roles, and, population growth? Does psychology have something to say about these issues?

It can be seen that over the past several decades , psychology in the USA has grown very rapidly , and it has become a very diverse field. It has been influenced by changes that have taken place in the nation as a whole. These trends will most likely continue, but psychology faces many important tasks. The field must remain cohesive somehow in spite of its diversity. We must help find solutions to many real problems that face the nation, and the world as a whole. We must search for general principles of psychological behavior, and for a better understanding of cultural similarities and differences, so that we have a truly international psychology. As our world shrinks around us, the changes and the challenges will continue. As psychologists from many nations of the earth , all of us need to work together, to share ideas, and to help each other toward our common goals.

REFERENCES

- ATKINSON R. L., ATKINSON R.C.& HILGARD, E.R. (1983). *Introduction to psychology*, (8th. ed.). New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.
- BORING, E. G. (1957). *A history of experimental psychology*, (2nd. ed.). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- LUNDIN, R.W. (1985). *Theories and systems in psychology*, (3rd. ed.). Lexington, Mass: Heath.
- NAISBITT, J. (1982). *Megatrends*, New York: Warner.
- TOFFLER, A. (1980). *The third wave*. New York: Morrow.

ABSTRACT

Psychology in the United States of America has grown at a very fast pace over the past 100 years. Subfields of psychology began to develop in the early years, and today many subfields exist. The growth will probably continue, but psychology must adapt to changes taking place within the discipline, as well as to changes taking place in the country as a whole.

RESUMEN

Desde los últimos 100 años la psicología en los Estados Unidos de América ha crecido a un ritmo acelerado. En los comienzos empezaron a desarrollarse subcampos, y hoy existe una gran cantidad de ellos. El crecimiento continuará, pero la psicología se tendrá que adaptar a los cambios que sufre la sociedad y la disciplina misma.