



# American Psychology or World Psychology?

## The Impact of Foreign Forces on the Origin and Advancement of American Psychological Association

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**Abstract.** This essay analyzes the significance of both foreign ideology and domestic reforms on the origin and evolution of the world-known American Psychological Association (APA). By examining early psychology texts since the Enlightenment era, this essay mainly argues the undeniable role of foreign ideology in the formation of psychology as an independent discipline and the development of American academic psychology which served as the foundation of the establishment of APA. Therefore, despite psychologists' assertions that domestic reforms during the Progressive Era directly shaped the future of the American Psychological Association and allowed American psychology to develop in its distinctive way, this essay argues that the American Psychological Association would not have become the accessible, disciplined organization with members from diverse backgrounds that it is nowadays without the influence of foreign ideology.

**Keywords:** History · Psychology · American Psychological Association · Foreign Influence · Progressivism · World War

## 1 Introduction

Seventeenth-century Europe served as a turning point as psychology first gained social importance during the Enlightened era. The Enlightenment thinkers not only advocated for rationality and advanced progressive ideals of liberty, freedom, and equality, but they also planted the seeds for scientific reasoning and social activism within American society. When the seeds blossomed over years of germination, America entered a period known as the Progressive Era, setting the stage for the imminent rise of the largest scientific and professional organization of psychologists today: the American Psychological Association (APA). Founded by G. Stanley Hall and thirty-one members at Clark University in July 1892, the establishment of the American Psychological Association not only marked the beginning of American psychology, but also served as the foundation for world psychology. Despite psychologists' assertions that domestic reforms during the Progressive Era directly shaped the future of the American Psychological Association and allowed American psychology to develop in its distinctive way, the American Psychological Association would not have become the accessible, disciplined organization with members from diverse backgrounds that it is nowadays without the influence of foreign ideology.

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## 2 The Enlightened Era

The Enlightenment was, chiefly, an intellectual and philosophical movement prevalent in Europe since the seventeenth century, but it reached America only in the eighteenth century after prominent foreign philosophers. Psychology is defined nowadays as the scientific study of mind and behavior, [1] but it was not until the introduction of Enlightened ideologies to American society that psychology was able to be distinguished from the field of philosophy.

### 2.1 Foreign Influence: John Locke

Prior to psychology becoming an independent field, the thoughts of John Locke, a core author of Britain's Enlightenment, already contained information that would later become the foundation for many crucial psychological concepts. For instance, Locke proposed that the human mind is born as a "blank slate" so "all ideas come from external sensation or internal reflection" referred to by a joint name: experience [2]. Experience functioned as the "fountain of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring [2]." As Locke's theory of mindset proposed, sensation served as the basis for all human psychological phenomena, and moved the emphasis of the mind from purely inherited and spiritual to a greater focus on the experience that ensured a balance between the brain and the external world. This 'Nature versus Nurture debate, still going strong today among psychologists, has its origins in seventeenth-century sensationalism.

Similarly, the impact of Locke on Americans' attitude toward higher education marked the beginning of the rise of intellectuals. Within *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Locke stated that out of all the men he met, "nine Parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their Education. Tis that which makes the great Difference in Mankind [3]." Locke attached great importance to education by pointing out that education functioned as a graver that engraved each individual differently from one another. The impact of Locke's emphasis on education can be shown in educational reforms during the Progressive Era later in America as the government applied merit system principles and aimed to allow progressive education to embrace all citizens in the twentieth century. As a whole, Locke's ideas laid the foundation for future psychology and encouraged reforms in higher education within the United States during the Progressive Era.

### 2.2 Foreign Influence: The Fechnerian–Wundtian Tradition

Furthermore, the adoption and spread of German idealism, the Fechnerian–Wundtian tradition, also played a crucial role in the history of American psychology. In order for the American Psychological Association to be established, psychology first had to become its own scientific discipline. However, Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher and Enlightenment thinker, once stated that "psychology-or the empirical doctrine of the soul -can never become a natural science proper ... because it can only provide a natural description of the [phenomena of the] soul, but not a science [i.e., demonstrative knowledge] of the soul [4]." Yet the Fechnerian–Wundtian tradition was instrumental

in transferring psychology from a branch of philosophy to an individual scientific field. Inspired by the criticism of Kant, Gustav Theodor Fechner started to study the relationship between conscious experience and physical stimulation. Fechner addressed the wide variability in sensitivity due to individual differences, time, and numerous internal and external factors within his studies. For instance, he suggested the ability to perceive differences in light intensity could be correlated to how good that individual's vision is and came up with an equation, " $S = k \log R$ ," that allowed scientists to "describe changes in the magnitude of psychological events ("How much sweeter is it now") in terms of changes in the stimulus ("Add another teaspoon of sugar in the coffee") [5]." The Fechnerian–Wundtian tradition began with Fechner but was propelled by Wilhelm Wundt who founded the first world psychology laboratory in 1879. Though the lab was located in a small storage room at Leipzig University, this unprecedented lab drew students from all over the world and allowed psychological theories to be proved by experiments.

### 2.3 American Psychology: William James

Nevertheless, instead of directly inheriting the European ideology, some American intellectuals were able to build on top of the existing theories with their own interpretation by immersing themselves in foreign education. William James, for example, brought the Fechnerian–Wundtian tradition to America by teaching the first course on the "new" psychology in America. Born in the United States, James was acclimated to British and Continental European ways during his academic experience in Germany where he was heavily influenced by the Fechnerian–Wundtian tradition. After returning to America, James avoided strictly following the thought pattern of Fechner and Wundt, but decided to build upon their ideas. Therefore, instead of focusing on the structure of the mind, James conducted his research on the function of the mind in real-life cases. For instance, in James' most famous work, he stated that:

Perception and sensation are names for different cognitive functions, not for different sorts of mental facts... The fuller of relationships the object is, on the contrary; the more it is something classes, located, measured, compared, assigned to a function etc.; the more unreservedly we call the state of mind a perception, and the relatively smaller is the part in it which sensation plays [6].

Studies by James proved the strong external influence on American society and revealed the long-lasting impacts of Locke. Under William James, many of his students, including W. E. B. Du Bois, G. Stanley Hall, and Mary Whiton Calkins, became eminent psychologists who drove the future of American psychology. Overall, James' work revealed that though American psychologists incorporated their own interpretations, they were heavily influenced by European scientists and primarily built on top of the foundation constructed by European society.

### 2.4 American Psychology: G. Stanley Hall

Known as the Father of educational American psychology, G. Stanley Hall promoted psychology education and organized the world-renowned American Psychological Association. Personally, Hall was a very talented and ambitious scholar who earned the first psychology Ph.D. in America and became the first president of both Clark University

and the American Psychological Association. During an introductory lecture about the newly established department of psychology at Johns Hopkins University, Hall specified the importance of the senses, the will, feelings, attention, memory, association, apperception, and more to the young generation [7]. He also expressed optimism and confidence about the future of psychological education, claiming that “the work of the department I have described will appeal irresistibly to young men, provided only it can have a representative here at all adequate, no one well read in the history of universities and their studies and dominant interests can doubt [7].” As the first American student to study in Wundt’s experimental lab, he comprehended the importance of laboratory experience and formal education. This experience motivated Hall’s future contributions and provoked his enthusiasm for psychology education, shaping him as an open-minded and welcoming person as he embraced members of different gender and religious background. For instance, Edward Pace, a Catholic, and Joseph Jastrow, a Jew, devised conventions for reporting, which later became known as the APA style. Mary Calkins, a woman, joined as a member in 1893 and later became the first woman to serve as the president of APA in 1905 [8]. However, some psychologists also argued that his openness was only a result of social activism during the Progressive Era.

### 3 Progressivism in the United States

As the Enlightenment reached its peak in the mid-eighteenth century, the emphasis on human reasoning, rationalism, and respect for humanity in Europe also infiltrated American society. For instance, Enlightened thinkers such as Locke directly influenced the thought of highly educated individuals, like Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Edward who graduated from Yale, and functioned as major forces in America’s “new learning” and philosophical psychological thought in particular [1]. The Enlightenment was considered extremely progressive as it aimed to defend the natural rights of humans and promoted the idea of liberty not only within Europe, but also in the period known as the Progressive Era in the early twentieth United States.

#### 3.1 Advancement in Education

One of the significant focal points of changes that foreshadowed the establishment of the American Psychological Association was the idea of advanced education. Influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, progressive leaders heavily emphasized educational reforms to not only cultivate the future of society, but also to fight against political corruption. For instance, the federal Pendleton Act of 1881 stated that government officials should either be selected on the basis of their scores on a competitive examination or of their professional training experience in municipal government to ensure the efficiency of government and avoid partisanship or corruption [9]. The importance attached to education and actual abilities led to the rise of numerous world-famous institutions.

Among all the new institutions established, perhaps Johns Hopkins University in 1876 had the most profound effect on American higher education leading to the establishment of the American Psychological Association. Johns Hopkins University was the first institution founded on the notion that graduate education and scientific research

were its primary focuses by demanding all faculty to be productive researchers and passionate scholars [10]. The academic atmosphere of Johns Hopkins encouraged students to carry on the system of “learning by doing” even after graduation. John Dewey, for example, received a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in the fields of philosophy and psychology. In 1896, Dewey founded a new laboratory school to promote the philosophy of pragmatism and aimed to cultivate the ability of students to understand and sympathize with real-life operations. Dewey stated, “when the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious [11].” When the American Psychological Association was first established, of the twenty-six original members, sixteen (62%) had some connection with Johns Hopkins. Of the first eleven presidents, seven (64%) were Johns Hopkins related, as were the first three secretary-treasurers [1]. No other institution had such a dominant impact on the early stage of the American Psychological Association which was the consequence of reforms in education inspired by foreign thinkers. Under the mission and belief of Johns Hopkins, Hall founded the first American productive psychology laboratory in 1883 and launched the first American psychological journal, *The American Journal of Psychology*, in 1887.

### 3.2 The Rise of Female Power

The rise in noticeable institutions during the Progressive Era proved the power of education in awakening people’s desire to seek equality and freedom, especially through the progress of the women’s suffrage movement. The first serious call for women’s suffrage was the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. From this convention, the “Declaration of Sentiments” was issued and stated that “all men and women are created equal [9].” However, as the Civil War approached, the flame of women’s suffrage was largely extinguished by the crisis over slavery until the Progressive Era when social activists relit the flame of the women’s suffrage movement. During an oral interview conducted in 1973, the California suffragist Helen Valeska Bary claimed that at the time, “there were hundreds of women’s clubs all over South California” and “almost every woman seemed to belong to at least one club [12].” As the women’s suffrage movement started to make its way through the country, more and more women were inspired and joined the movement to advocate for their own rights and equality, by stepping out of the domestic sphere to the professional fields. Eventually, after years of struggle, the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 granted women the right to vote in America. Therefore, some argue that the progressive reforms were the primary cause for the rise of women psychologists in the near future, but in reality, the reforms did not lead to the end of gender discrimination in American society.

Mary Whiton Calkins, for instance, was elected as the first female president of the American Psychological Association in 1898. Once when Calkins was attending a lunch meeting of the Committee at the Harvard Union with Dr. Hugo Münsterberg, “the burly head-waiter stoutly protested our entrance. No woman, he correctly insisted, might set foot in the main hall; nor was it possible to admit so many men, balanced by one woman only, to the ladies’ dining-room [13].” Though Calkins’s path to the leadership role in

a “patriarchy” was covered by obstacles, fortunately, Calkins was able to study under the guidance of numerous prominent psychologists at Harvard who fought for her to receive equal access to official education. In the summer of 1890, Calkins received warm and encouraging notes from her “professors,” William James and Josiah Royce. James, specifically, expressed indignation with Harvard’s exclusionary policy: “It is flagitious that you should be kept out. Enough to make dynamiters of you and all women. I hope and trust that your application will break the gender barrier [14].” However, no matter how hard Calkins and her supportive “professors” worked, Harvard never admitted Calkins as a formal student and ultimately refused to grant her a doctoral degree by holding to the belief that coeducation symbolized institutional decay [14]. Though Calkins’ leadership role in the American Psychological Association did arouse the beginning of female power in professional fields, she still had to suffer under oppression within a male-dominated society.

The second female president of the American Psychological Association, Margaret Floy Washburn, earned the first doctoral degree given to a female in America. Admittedly, girls during and after the Progressive Era benefited from access to early education, so Washburn was able to receive education at seven when she learned “rudiments of arithmetic, a foundation in French and German that saved me several years in later life, and the ability to read music and play all the major and minor scales from memory [15].” However, it was not until Washburn’s high school senior year that she gained a dominant interest in the new science of experimental psychology. Learning of the psychological laboratory just established at Columbia by Dr. Raymond Bernard Cattell, a British-American psychologist invited from England, Washburn was determined to be his pupil, or even a “hearer,” [15] since Columbia never admitted a woman graduate student. However, as a lifelong champion of freedom and equality of opportunity, Dr. Cattell treated Washburn as equal to the other four male students in class and assessed her using the same standards [15]. Fortunately, Washburn received the doctor’s degree in June 1894, after years of hard work. The rise of suffragists offered more opportunities for women to receive higher education and take leadership roles in prominent organizations, but it can be seen from both Calkins’ and Washburn’s experiences that professors who were either in both a foreign country or had the chance to study abroad supported them unconditionally despite their identity as women. Therefore, it can be inferred that some Americans who believe in gender equality were influenced by foreign ideologies.

### **3.3 The Involvement of African-Americans**

Along with active reforms related to gender and education, the emphasis on African-American rights continued to decline after Reconstruction since limited actions were implemented in favor of African Americans. As European countries abolished slavery during the mid-nineteenth century, fewer texts and ideologies were focused on African descents outside of the United States. Therefore, without foreign influence, the only two major approaches to support African Americans in the Progressive Era came from W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Du Bois advocated full equal rights for black citizens to vote, enjoy civic equality, and equal access to higher education for the “talented tenth” of African American youth [9]. However, Washington argued that vocational education was considered the education of “survival” and stated that African Americans should

gain equality by gradually working from the bottom toward a common future with the white. Within Washington's Atlanta Exposition Speech, he emphasized the importance of industrial skills leading to better wages compared with Du Bois who advocated for liberal arts education [9]. The narrow focus and limited reforms on African American life can be attributed to the delayed rise of African American psychologists in the professional field. It was not until 1920 that the first African-American, Francis Sumner, received a Ph.D. in psychology. A lack of emphasis on improving the condition of African Americans prevented Sumner from attending high school, but surprisingly, his talents enabled him to pass the entrance exams for Lincoln University and Clark University. As the leading African American in the field of psychology, Sumner's unique experience led him to become interested in understanding racial bias and supporting educational justice despite the lack of funding support from research agencies due to his race. Thirteen years later, Inez Beverly Prosser became the first African American woman to receive a doctoral degree in psychology almost forty years after Washburn, the first white woman to do so [16]. The lack of emphasis on African-Americans' condition both in foreign countries and in the Progressive Era led to the delayed rise of black intellectuals.

#### **4 APA During World War**

The American Psychological Association's rise and growth were in part catalyzed by foreign influence, especially during the World War Era. During World War I, the American Psychological Association strived to use psychobiology, the application of biological principles in relation to psychological theories, to address contemporary social problems to heighten psychology's scientific and professional standing. However, doubts against this newly-born science led to a lack of government financing and opposition from military officials at the beginning. Therefore, the primary goal of psychologists was to prove conclusively that they were qualified to perform service of unquestioned value to the government. If psychological services were not absolutely conclusive, "the science of psychology would suffer an injury from which it would not recover for many years [1]." Implementing the war service programs such as troop morale programs like the Student Army Training Corps (SATC), however, demonstrated the value of psychology and allowed the American Psychological Association to gain official recognition as a matter of military and civilian defense [1]. In respect to this globalized period of warfare, the membership of the American Psychological Association grew from 4,183 to 30,839, or 637% and the operating budget grew from \$110,000 to \$5,147,000, or 45 times [1]. By assisting war service programs in various forms of personnel selection, specialized training, and morale research, psychologists were able to increase public recognition of the value of psychology, and gather greater public and private endowments for scientific research. Consequently, the American Psychological Association evolved from a disciplinary society into a professional association serving and representing the interests of its members after the Second World War.

#### **5 Conclusion**

In the history of modern psychology, the American Psychological Association has contributed greatly to the development and advancement of psychology in the world. Since

the mid-nineteenth century, the United States inherited the theories and ideologies of European approaches to psychology, and gradually incorporated unique interpretations throughout history. However, the accomplishments of the American Psychological Association were predominantly attributed to foreign influence which started the century of psychology as a science and expedited the advancement of the American Psychological Association, especially in the post-World War Era. Now, American psychology has become a well-developed and professional organization, with countless divisions that cover all aspects of psychology. As mental health becomes a global crisis in the twenty-first century, the importance of professional psychological advancement organizations is increasingly pronounced. Therefore, it is important to look into the origin and development of the world-known American Psychological Association and analyze the factors that contributed to its success. In fact, the journey of the American Psychological Association proved that a successful organization is a group of many hands but one mind with the same passion.

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