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Not Quite New Worlds
Psychologists’ Conceptions of the Ideal Family in the Twenties
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At one point in B. F. Skinner’s Walden Two, Frazer names the essential impediment to social progress: “No one can seriously doubt that a well-managed community will get along successfully as an economic unit. A child could prove it. The real problems are psychological” (1976:73). The psychological problems specifically pertain to social relations—those between men and women and between adults and children. As a psychologist, Skinner is not a specialist in the family, children, or the social psychology of gender relations, yet he has seriously contemplated the psychological problems of social life. Even several decades before Skinner presented his fictional plan for social amelioration, other psychologists drew up blueprints for social relations in an improved society. Some of them adopted the utopian genre; others did not do so explicitly. Despite theoretical differences, psychologists of the 1920s agreed with the Arcadian idea that attaining a harmonious and controlled society depended on healthy relations between men, women, and children.
These shared interests in normative social relations situated within a stable society raise questions about psychologists' involvements in such matters. Today little is known about earlier theories of the appropriate relations between men, women, and children. Conventional histories of psychology offer no accounts, for they mainly document the growth of grand theories and methodological techniques. Such histories rarely even discuss the subfields—developmental and social psychology—that typically dealt with human relations.

Among the prescriptions for social relations between women, men, and children are three utopian schemes written in the 1920s by G. Stanley Hall, William McDougall, and John B. Watson. Although clearly fictional creations, these works mirror much of their authors' psychological thought. The utopias constitute an illustrative introduction to theoretical presuppositions or normative ideals about gender, sex differences, and the family. But what is probably most intriguing about the utopian fictions is their similar, commonly held perspectives on social relations in American society. Hall, McDougall, and Watson shared beliefs about the urgent social problems in America and their respective resolutions. Furthermore, their conceptions were highly consistent with non-fictional analyses made by themselves and other experimental psychologists who also expressed concerns about the proper place of women, men, and children in an orderly society. Their scientific commitment to value neutrality did not seem to inhibit advocacy of particular social ideals, and the nature of their prescriptions suggests that they originated at least in part outside the professional confines of experimental psychology.

A thorough examination of these professional attitudes toward women, men, and children actually requires both social and intellectual histories. The ambitions of this article are somewhat more modest. They are simply to recount and compare some of the normative prescriptions made by psychologists during the decade and to show precisely how psychologists merged these prescriptions with the development of scientific theories. The task of bracketing such prescriptions is undertaken first by showing how several utopian conceptions of social relations resemble professional ones, and second by tracing the popularity of these conceptions. Given that in the twentieth century psychology was developed as an objective science, it is also necessary to try to understand how these normative interests in social conditions could be justified as legitimate projects of the scientific psychologist. The first section, then, describes several utopian visions about improved relations between women, men, and children, while the next section explores more closely the justifications offered for such professional involvement in remedying social relations. The concluding section is given to a more detailed examination of how these social prescriptions fitted with the emerging psychology of the decade, particularly with a behaviorist stance stressing social control and individual adjustment to the environment.

Before proceeding it is important to indicate what I do not attempt. Although the work of certain individuals—especially the three utopist-psychologists and Floyd Allport—is emphasized, minimal attention is given to biographical elements. This mindful neglect results partly from a prior need to understand the broader social and intellectual climate in which professional thinking about men, women, and children took form. As Harris (this volume) has noted, a substantial reliance on biography does not answer important questions about the social significance of psychologists' writings. Biographical explanations frequently suggest a certain uniqueness of ideas (and sometimes even an excuse for them) and may obscure how these ideas were shared among individuals. Intellectual thought such as treatises on the proper relations between women and men not only is an individual achievement (or foible) but also is rooted in a complex framework and sustained by an equally complex network of intellectual, political, and social influences.

In addition to the relative abeyance of biography, an important question is raised here but not answered. Although correspondences between psychological theory and the broader social context are illuminated, there is little detailed information about the actual social conditions against which psychologists were reacting. For instance, it remains to be determined what, if anything, psychologists were referring to when they spoke of family crises and what effect, if any, their work had on the dynamics or structure of social life in America. This question requires study of the actual social relations in that decade, including divorce rates,
juvenile delinquency, and domestic and work patterns of men and women; it essentially proposes tasks for extensive studies in social history.

Utopias and Psychology

Scientists, including those studying psychology, have not neglected utopian thinking. Around the turn of the century a number of psychologically oriented scientists exploited the utopian genre for disciplinary causes. Gabriel Tarde, a French social scientist whose work influenced many early American social psychologists, illustrated his social-psychological laws in a fanciful utopia (1905). In his theoretical undertakings Tarde had established laws based on social processes of imitation, invention, and genius and later employed them in a story about surviving the sun's extinction in an underground society. Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin and an investigator of human evolution, situated his science in a utopia about a world designed according to tenets of evolution. Galton's utopia enacted eugenic principles whereby the fittest individuals, once tested with the latest devices for measuring mental and physical traits, were permitted to breed only with similarly superior stocks; lesser individuals either bred among themselves or remained childless. About the same time Havelock Ellis (1900), the noted sexologist, published a story of a future and perfected society where all science was known and yet metaphysics and aesthetics superseded science in directing everyday life. The works of Hall, McDougall, and Watson go further in that the authors were professional psychologists, figures of some authority, who argued for the importance of a science that had matured—for it had achieved recognition and a considerable degree of respect.

G. Stanley Hall and Atlantis

G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924) has been remembered for his role in the founding of American experimental psychology; he organized the first psychological journal, the first American psychological association, the first Wundtian laboratory in America, and the only visit of Sigmund Freud to America. He also has received acknowledgment as a versatile psychologist who promoted genetic psychology, an interest in psychoanalysis, and the use of the questionnaire method.

Omitted from most historical accounts are Hall's comprehensive view of human evolution and his proposals for improving humanity. One such proposal is contained in a utopia, "The Fall of Atlantis," which he wrote late in his career (1920a). The story of a perfected civilization, the lost Atlantis, purportedly was narrated by a cultural anthropologist who visited the city's remains in 2000 A.D. and learned that it was once the center of civilization, hosting a culture that had evolved far beyond the contemporary vision of progress. Atlantis symbolized human perfection in every detail; its language was the most flexible expression of the human psyche, medicine had excelled to the state of a philosophic science, the political structure integrated all known codes of justice, and education served every stage of life. Its citizens had realized a social consciousness or "mansenul" by subordinating individual to social desires and embracing the evolutionary unity of all nature. The fall of Atlantis was a gradual degeneration initiated by the rise of individualism and by transformations in the physical environment. Social institutions decayed as communal practices were abandoned in pursuits of individual interests (thus physicians began to practice for personal profit). Simultaneously the island-state was slowly engulfed by water.

During the flowering of Atlantis, science was lauded as a predominant achievement that brought such remarkable discoveries as the chemical synthesis of diamonds and gold and the generation of life from crystals. Its elevated status was derived from the belief that research was the highest expression of human improvement. And of all scientific endeavors, psychology was the most precious manifestation of this belief, for it dealt directly with human abilities. Psychology had been emancipated from metaphysics and physiology and "had become a culminating academic theme, the only one which all desired and which it was felt needful to know. It was genetic, comparative, clinical, and strove chiefly to give self-knowledge and self-control" (pp. 57–58). Researchers of this new synthetic psychology were exonerated from many social duties, supported for their work, and "regarded as the light and hope of the state" (p. 56). Psychology was instrumental in perfecting the social order, and the psychologist occu-
pied a revered social role consonant with the discipline's unique responsibilities.

The relevance of psychology was apparent throughout Atlantean society, from the design of jurisprudence to education. Even the teachers of religion, the "heartformers," practiced a "higher psychology of the folksoul" (p. 80). It was these psychological applications that informed conduct between children and adults as well as between men and women. Childrearing or "learning" had become a domain in which the Atlanteans performed above all races. After their eugenic fitness and prenatal care were ensured, children were given the utmost attention during their first four years. Atlanteans believed — even more than do our Freudians" (p. 46) — that these years were seminal ones for the growth of temperament, character, and disposition. Thus, all possible efforts were made to apply the pleasure-pain principle and minimize repressive tendencies. Experimental studies had determined that the early years be given to free play, dancing, storytelling, and music. At the age of six or seven, children were sent to the country to experience nature, and at the age of eight or ten they would begin a more conventional education in reading and writing. At puberty children began four to eight years of occupational or professional training, and during this period education was "more or less" segregated by sex "as the normal tastes and prospective spheres of each were differentiated" (p. 54). By "more or less" it was meant that all education was available to both sexes "although it was very early found that there was a great and natural difference in the fields to which each was drawn, as well as in the kind and strength of interest and the most effective methods" (p. 103). Throughout this educational regimen children were observed, measured, and tested by trained researchers.

The account of family relations was given almost entirely to describing the activities of women. Atlantean women were the pillar of psychological and moral order. As a mother, a woman "not only swayed man... but had in a sense fashioned him by molding his very diathesis in the first few years of life during which character is plastic" (p. 100). As a wife and citizen, her "naive intuitions were, in a word, regarded as almost the sole and only guide given to man to direct and impel him upward in the path of progress" (p. 109). These expectations for women were implied in the Atlanteans' theory of evolution: women, by nature, were more representative of the race and of its moral development (pp. 99-100). Being exceptional in physical and moral strength, Atlantean women still bore healthy children at age sixty. The reverence for childbearing was such that every mother displayed a star on her breast for each child she bore. The moral and intuitional superiority of women earned them substantial leisure time, and independently of their spouses they were permitted to hold property, which consisted of special houses for social events and the care of the ill. The leisure time granted to women was successful because "the ambition of nearly everyone was to be a good mother, and to this end most were willing and eager to subordinate every other" (p. 102). Women were also responsible for governing public and private morals, as well as childcare, and in their old age, for dispensing advice to men.

Relationships between men and women, especially in marriage, were primarily determined according to women's special obligations and privileges. The high esteem granted to the family and childrearing meant that individuals who refrained from marriage were given additional duties and taxed for their socially reprehensible position. Relationships were prized not for their romance but for their lifelong efforts at mutual adjustment. Although the daily life, dress, and obligations of men are not as precisely described in the text as they are for women, it is clear that men's behavior was determined significantly by the roles of women. For instance, men tried to earn "badges" symbolizing their membership in women's houses, and to obtain the badges they had to undergo court procedures to judge their moral stature.

The utopian formula for the conduct of women, men, and children is apparent in many of Hall's professional writings. His interpretation of evolutionary theory is fundamental to nearly all of his psychology, beginning with Adolescence (Hall 1904a). The model holds that human evolution is primarily of consciousness and is progressing toward a permanent racial form; that is, toward a consciousness of the race or a folksoul (1899, 1940a). It includes two additional constitutive premises: that evolution of the race is repeated in the life of the individual — the idea of recapitulation — (1904a, see Ross 1972) and that evolution occurs not only at the level of the individual and the race but also in all human aggregates from the family to political institutions (1907, 1909). Given human knowledge of evolution, Hall believed that we must
protect its patterns. This commitment to guarding evolution underscores his involvement in social reforms because they aided progress (1905, 1907, 1908, 1923b) and his criticisms of individualism and the purported "cult of the self" because human beings should be concerned primarily with survival of the race and not the individual (1923b).

This evolutionary model informed Hall's work on childrearing and pedagogy, and he regarded children as the key to our racial future. His writings on the child study movement often bore the motto that the child "controls the future" (1910:504). In accordance with recapitulation theory, childrearing should serve that particular stage of racial evolution that corresponds to the particular stage of the child's development. Hall argued that educational research has tended to focus almost solely on the intellectual stages of this development and that the home environment and the mother's involvement were requisite to optimal child care because the early years of life represented stages of emotional and physical maturation (1902, 1904b, 1905). This belief was augmented by acceptance of the Freudian notion that emotional and instinctual energies take priority over intellectual abilities (1913, 1914, 1915).

The argument for sex-segregated education and for domesticity and motherhood in women's lives also corresponds with Hall's evolutionary model. First, Hall held that progress entailed emergence of both greater differences between the sexes as well as closer proximity of the racial type to that of the adolescent (1903a, 1906a, b, 1919a). Women were closer to the child type and hence more representative of the racial type: "woman is more generic than man, nearer to, and a better representative of, the race, more liable to be injured by specialization. . . . She is more intuitive, less discursive, has a far richer emotional life. If man is a political, she is a religious, animal; more conservative, less radical" (1904a:538–39, 1905). Women were especially suited as mothers and moral teachers because they exemplified exalted racial objectives such as intuition and emotional sensitivity and because, with the child, the woman "shares more divinity than does the far more highly specialized and narrow organism of the man" (1905:27). Hall was so convinced of the permanence of such traits that he believed that the trends of working and childless women were temporary (1903b), and he even saw the flappers of the 1920s as protecting these revered characteristics under "superficial" guises (1922a). Even a decade before the flappers made their appearance, Hall suggested that women's evolutionary position and emotional superiority might make the twentieth century "the century of woman" (1913:791).

These demands for the recognition of women's special characteristics and the related proposals for educational and family reforms gained urgency when Hall observed deterioration in American society (1921, 1922b, 1923a, b). He gradually became horrified by degeneration in the youth, politics, science, and family life. In a 1922 popular article he listed various intellectuals who had recognized impending disasters, and he advised that "Both individual and group selfishness (nationalism) must be transcended, and nothing less than a new dispensation of service and a new enthusiasm for humanity must be instituted" (1922b:840). Hall even saw psychology as a victim of these social diseases, yet he also continued to believe in the discipline's great potential to restore social health and revitalize progress (1919b, 1920b, 1923a).

William McDougall and Eugenia

William McDougall (1871–1948) was British by birth, but his career as a psychologist was spent equally in Britain and the United States. He has been credited with anticipating the behaviorist trend later promulgated by Watson, and his research in purposive psychology and instincts has earned him recognition as the progenitor of the hormic school of psychology (emphasizing goal orientation in behavior). Despite these hudos, little attention has been given to his published works on social psychology, evolution, and the psychology of politics and social ethics.

One of those neglected publications, "The Island of Eugenia," proposes a utopian society founded on eugenic principles (1921). Eugenia is described as the plan of an academic scientist who, after thirty years of study, shared his scheme with an old college friend who had become a affluent philanthropist. The plan transpires through a dialogue between scientist and philanthropist, between the "Seer" and the "Practical Man," Eugenia would be devoted to the propagation of "superior strains" recruited on the basis of family history, intellectual abilities, and moral qual-
fications. Candidates for citizenship would be selected for superb phenotypic characteristics, which supposedly represent exceptional genotypic traits. The selected breeders eventually could reenter society either to raise genetic fitness through intermarriage or to apply their superior intelligence to social and political improvement.

Just as the design of Eugenia required the knowledge possessed by the scientific “Seer,” so the maintenance of the island depended on science. The protagonist, a scientist of nature and society, drafted the plans precisely because of a belief in the efficacy of science and a conviction that other reform measures, those endorsed by Carnegie and Rockefeller, were merely “social plasters” (pp. 5–6). The primary institutions in Eugenia would be the universities, where research would flourish. Scientific studies would center on the science of Eugenia’s founding, psychology (particularly its relation to eugenic issues). The extensive concern with human conditions and not social structure followed from the belief that “forms of organization matter little; the all important thing is the quality of the matter to be organized, the quality of the human beings that are the stuff of our nations and societies” (p. 7). Psychology would therefore be precedent: “the science of man will for the first time receive adequate recognition, that is to say, it will dominate the scene. To it all other sciences will be duly subordinated” (pp. 24–25).

The utopian essay merely sketches an ideal form of child-rearing and family life yet clearly indicated that Eugenians would practice a “cult of the family” (p. 9). With a reverence for progeny, the family would be so important that for the citizens, “early marriage and the production of many children is their greatest privilege, at once their highest duty and their best guarantee of happiness” (p. 13). Family size would be of five to ten children, work schedules would be adjusted according to family needs, and failure to marry or bear children would seriously jeopardize one’s position in the community. In keeping with the high esteem for family life is the special care taken in childrearing: education would take place in the homes and schools, where, given biological soundness, every child would “be fitted to attain eminence in some walk of life and to render great services to his fellow-men” (p. 16).

The emphasis on prolific reproduction and proper child-

rearing carried implications for the lives of Eugenian women. Contrary to the common expectation that educated women would avoid domesticity, McDougall claimed that refusal to bear children would come only from those women “in whom the maternal instinct is weak or who fail to absorb the ideals of Eugenia” (p. 14). Women would be reared in a moral atmosphere that valued motherhood and a community of women, or “gentlewomen,” would ensure that no individual woman would be unduly burdened with domestic work. Less is revealed about the duties of the Eugenian men. Although producing a family would be a prerequisite to sound citizenship, occupational qualifications and social service would also be valued. Little else is said directly about men and the relations between men and women except on the question of monogamy. McDougall believed that knowledge of human nature had revealed that males were polygamous while females were monogamous; however, for the happiness of women and the survival of the family, Eugenian men would suppress their polygamous tendencies.

These utopian propositions about the family and roles of women and men relate to many of McDougall’s professional writings, particularly to those outlining his unique conception of psychology. Although thoroughly committed to an empirical, behavioral, and specifically an experimental psychology, McDougall rejected a mechanistic model of human action in favor of a teleological or purposive one (1912, 1923b, 1928a). His teleological position implied that all human behavior was oriented to some goal; that is, humans possess a tendency to strive toward certain ends (1908).

McDougall studied human dispositions in terms of their innate or hereditary bases. This interest culminated in the evolutionary proposal that mind evolved and that these evolving mental dispositions were inherited (1923a, 1925, 1928b). In turn, the proposal guided two of his pet projects: promotion of eugenic measures and of psychological research on urgent social problems. Just as his evolutionary theory of mental dispositions supported suggestions for eugenics, so it directed his prescriptions for psychology. Assuming that mind evolved in a purposive manner, McDougall defined science as a product of mind whose purpose is the acquisition of useful knowledge (1929, 1934b, 1938).
From this perspective the priority of the science of psychology becomes evident, for scientists would benefit from the knowledge of purposiveness and mind that is attainable through psychological studies (1934b, 1937). Psychology was the means to control all social life, for it could "render our knowledge of human nature more exact and more systematic, in order that we may control ourselves more wisely and influence our fellow-men more effectively" (1923a:1).

Understanding McDougall’s directives for the lives of women, men, and children also requires knowledge of his conviction that society was deteriorating. He frequently outlined degenerative trends in social and political affairs and attributed them to a decline in genetic qualities and to a slippage in character and morals. Of the latter concern, there is perhaps no clearer example than his assertion that “Our present tendency is towards a world of gaudily attired neurotics and maniacs housed in barracks where they will pass the time between crises and disasters pleasantly enough, pressing innumerable buttons to set in automatic action the inane products of jazz and movie factories” (1931:69). Symptoms of degeneration included a rise in the “waster mind” or the individual’s interest in sensuality over moral reason, which had been initiated by escalating materialism, the dropping genetic fitness, and the impact of Freudian notions of pansexualism (1936: see also 1921; 1927a, b, c; 1931).

Given these problems, McDougall proposed social regeneration and eventual racial progress through eugenics (1920, 1921, 1926, 1931) and related family reforms (1907, 1933). With the purported need to revive traditional moral values, the family was held as fundamental to developing sound characters (1927a, 1931). Protection of the family, societal reforms in morality (1923a, 1926, 1934a), and reinstatement of early moral training over “generations would finally result in the birth of children who spontaneously, without precept and without example, react with passionate anger to all injustices and cruelty” (1934b:207). Since scientific knowledge of instincts and sentiments was thought to be necessary to establishing sound moral reforms, McDougall called for purposive psychologists who “shall make themselves the saviours of our collapsing civilization” (1936:viii).

John B. Watson and the Hopes of Behaviorism

John B. Watson (1878–1958) is noted for his zealotry and his role as a proponent of what became for a time the foremost orientation in psychology. He is also credited with persuasively defending the study of behavior over that of consciousness or introspection and for promoting the use of objective methods, the recognition of environmental influences on behavior, and the practical application of psychological research. Of the last, conventional histories do little more than mention his dedication to practical psychology.

Among Watson’s interests in the practical applications of psychology that have not received attention is a utopian vision based on behaviorist principles. Originally titled, “The Behaviorist’s Utopia,” the manuscript was published as a magazine article titled, “Should a Child Have More Than One Mother?” (1929b). Watson envisioned a thoroughly behavioristic country with “units” of 260 husbands and wives (and a few extras who serve as “spare” husbands and wives). Each husband and wife pair, aided by a “scientifically trained assistant,” cares for three children, although they never know the identity of their biological children. Offspring rotate among the parent pairs, spending four weeks at each home, and at the age of twenty, “His 260th mother and father pat him on the head and send him out to earn his livingunalaid” (p. 33). Eschewing religion, politics, philosophy, history, and tradition, Utopia’s citizens seek only “behaviorist happiness” and do so by experimentation. Utopia contains both social innovations and traditions; for instance, Watson decreed that the country would be monogamous or “at any rate, I want to see monogamy tried” (p. 32).

In Watson’s utopia the common measures for social order are replaced entirely by behavioral science. A cardinal feature of this system is the “behaviorist physicians” whose medical education is supplemented by training in behaviorism so they can “guard the community on the psychological side just as they guard it on the medical side. There also is preventive psychology in Utopia just as there is preventive medicine” (p. 34). The behavioral scientists do not alter the social and moral standards, precisely because the standards are identical with those of the science: both are behavioristic and thoroughly divorced from religion, politics,
and philosophy. The morals of Utopia are of “behavioristic happiness,” and the duties of the behaviorist physicians correspond to these morals. Elimination of the unfit through infanticide, retraining of the behaviorally maladjusted, and the practice of “preventive psychology” by conditioning constitute the scientific techniques for realizing social controls and sound personalities.

Behaviorist principles structure child care, and mothers are assisted in these crucial tasks by the behaviorist physicians. From birth onward the child inhabits an environment designed for conditioning special attributes. Each child has a separate room, and all houses have “a large common playroom well supplied with windows of quartz glass,” as well as extensive yards with tall fences (p. 32). The aim of early training is to condition independence and an absorption in activity. The first attribute is initially encouraged by concealing information about the child’s biological parents and is maintained by such techniques as equipping homes “with a periscope so that the parents can glance now and then at the child without being seen. The child learns to do his stuff without having to have notice” (p. 34). Schools in Utopia continue the training of independence and absorption, and in higher education children acquire the social ideals of Utopia through sex-segregated programs. Vocational or professional training commences at the age of sixteen when, segregated by sex, males learn medicine, science, or manufacturing while females learn to manage homes, handle men, perfect sex techniques, and rear children.

In Utopian culture women are trained in what they should and should not do. For instance, it was believed that the mother’s overexpression of love leads to dysfunctional dependency in the child, and accordingly, Utopian family life consists of anonymous and continually rotating parents. Women remain in the home, for “There are no women in industry as such. They are not needed there. They are needed in the home. They are happy there” (p. 34). Dedicated domesticity also ensures that women do not compete with men yet still exhibit unique qualities. They are obliged to be graceful, strong, and beautiful, and large or ill-favored women are not allowed to breed. Despite their attractiveness, women overcome their narcissist tendencies at twenty-eight “—almost coincidentally with the appearance of the first wrinkle” (p. 34). Finally, women are specially trained to relate to men: they learn about handling their engagement, remaining interesting and desirable, and mastering the “technique of sex.” With all these skills, Utopian women “are busy and happy from morning to night” (p. 35).

Relations between men and women are especially important, and in fact, mating is the only strong attachment permitted among individuals. Except for the requirement of physical attractiveness, little is said of the men’s performance in these relationships. Some emphasis is given to the occupational and professional abilities of the men who are experienced and versatile such that “Anyone of them could start naked into the woods of Africa and conquer his environment.” (p. 35).

Concerns about improving marriage and childrearing are common fare in Watson’s psychology and popular writings, and to him, the concerns related directly to his program for psychology. Watson’s noted behaviorist decree asserts the failure of American psychology to become a science and advises that the study of behavior would remedy the problems (1913b). Watson initiated a model for studying behavior—from the study of its origins (1913a, 1917, 1919, 1920b) to the laws governing its acquisition by the individual (1916, 1920a, 1927a, 1928a; Watson and Rayner 1920). Although he conducted little research, he grew convinced that nearly all behaviors were the product of learning, most of which occurred during the first three or four years of life (1919, 1924, 1928b, d, e; Watson and Watson 1921). Assured of such behavioral laws, Watson often ruminated on the social consequences of controlling behavior. In fact, he described the aim of research to be the discovery of human adjustments to stimuli and stated that “My final reason for this is to learn general and particular methods by which I may control behavior” (1913b:168). Thus, psychological research would ultimately yield knowledge for physicians, educators, jurors, and businessmen (1924, 1928a, d).

These aspirations for applying psychology support Watson’s concerns about the relationship between women, men, and children; of all the social maladies he scrutinized, those of male and female relationships caused him the greatest worry. Watson believed that sexuality was a major problem in contemporary marriages, but women were creating others. Not only were young single women teasing older married men, but married women were abandoning all efforts to remain attractive (1929a). These conditions were worsened by the decrement in the economic and bio-
logical reinforcements for marriage and the failure of many women who embarked on careers (1927b, 1929a). The plight of modern marriage augmented childrearing problems; conventional family practices were responsible for creating lazy, dependent, unhappy, and neurotic children (Watson 1924, 1928a; Watson and Watson 1921).

Solutions to these problems could not be made through traditional modes of social reform, because society tried to adjust individuals through “round-about, hit-and-miss methods” (1917:330). But behavior psychology would generate means for control and adjustment by the superior methods of science, making it possible for “every boy and girl by the age of fourteen to know his own organism and its reactions. . . . I think this would lead the organism to be behavioristically self-correcting—just as now the body unaided . . . heals its own wounds” (1928c:113). Although Watson held that everyone could practice these experimental methods of control to achieve individual happiness, marital bliss, and social order, he recognized the need for a new type of specialist. He suggested that either psychologists or physicians would become the new “analysts” whose behaviorist training would allow them to condition, uncondition, and recondition patients (1924, 1928d). While these were conjectures about the future, Watson was certain that, for the present, “analysis based upon behaviorist principles is here to stay and is a necessary profession in society—to be placed upon a par with internal medicine and surgery” (1924:297).

Shared Ideals and the Question of Theory and Value

Hall, McDougall, and Watson held several divergent views on the ideal state. For Hall, utopia resulted from an evolutionary process that moved toward realizing social consciousness. McDougall’s utopia would serve as a propaedeutic against world disaster by upgrading biological and consequently social life throughout the world. Watson envisioned utopia as a behavioral training ground for social order and individual happiness, as well as a model community upon which others could be patterned. These imagined worlds varied in the specific plans for attaining psychological perfection: by enlightened education for social har-

mony, by eugenic breeding for superior traits, or by conditioning appropriate behaviors from infancy onward.

The variations are understandable in terms of the well-known differences between the psychological theories of the authors. It is the similarities among the three utopias that require further explanation, most notably the ideals set for the lives and relationships of women, men, and children. All three writers stressed the necessity of scientific child-care practices both in the home and educational system. They endorsed monogamy and the nuclear family as imperative to moral and social well-being. The role of women was described in terms of their domestic and moral obligations, and the brief descriptions given to men’s lives emphasized the importance of occupational competence. Finally, all three authors imagined some type of psychological expert who employed superior knowledge to monitor the social order.

The similarities in these utopias and the revealed symmetries between the authors’ utopias and their psychological writings help us to identify certain shared ideals or metatheoretical prescriptions. However, they do not indicate the reasons why psychologists concerned themselves with the stability of social systems. Why, at this particular time, did many psychologists apparently accept responsibility for the welfare of society? And why did they decide that the problems were reducible to those of interpersonal or familial dynamics? The first question is essentially one of professional image and can be approached only through a broader view of the professional ethos and ethics of the early twentieth century. The latter question necessitates an examination of detail rather than breadth and is addressed through analysis of one psychologist’s theory of social life.

Psychologists as Experts on Life

During the twenties psychology became a frequent subject of humor. Magazines and newspapers hosted articles on intelligence tests for bank managers and marine biologists (Leacock 1924), on tunes like “Yes, we have no mentalities” (Birnbaum 1964), and on the difficulties encountered when asking a cop to excuse one’s traffic violations because personal will and responsibility were illusions (Estabrooks 1928). Probably never before had psychology
been targeted for such jest, and while these lighthearted invectives are a telling indicator of the public appeal of psychology, they also smack of cynicism. Even psychologists themselves remarked on an acquired arrogance of their discipline, and many would have agreed with fellow psychologist Joseph Jastrow that psychology had been captivated by “the lure of the footlights and the glare of the headlights” (1928:134).

While amusing in their own right, these commentaries illuminate a stage that had been set for psychology and the multiple roles in which the profession had been cast. Some of these roles had roots in twentieth-century American reformism, beginning as early as the progressive period (1900–1917) and reappearing in the reconstruction spirit of post-World War I. Although the war is typically interpreted as a marker for the end of a reform era, viewing postwar disillusionment as its terminus obscures half of what Morton White (1957) has labeled the “double effect” of the war: a renewed optimism regarding reform fuelled by the putative success of professionals in the war effort. In addition to these contributions of the new specialists with social scientific techniques, there was an escalated apprehensiveness concerning the high level of immigration and the problems associated with immigrants’ lives in America, as well as fears about the rising standard of living, higher divorce rates, liberalized sexual conduct, and the psychological health of individuals, be they businessmen, children, laborers, or housewives (for one perspective on these social concerns, see Report of the President’s Committee 1933).

The progressives had asserted the eventual necessity for scientific guidance in social and political change (Haber 1964; McGraw 1974; Wiebe 1967), and the war made many of these a reality (Dupree 1957; Kaplan 1956; Tobey 1971; Yerkes 1920). The use of scientific techniques implemented by scientific experts became a common theme among many American intellectuals. In planning reconstruction, social critics such as Walter Lippmann (1922) and John Dewey (1922) revealed a certain loss of faith in citizen participation and, alternatively, placed greater responsibility for social change on the shoulders of an intellectual, specifically a scientific, elite. Scientists would provide leadership by “interposing some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled” (Lippmann 1922:368).

Lippmann’s text reflects another important shift in reform policies in stipulating the essential part that social scientists, especially psychologists, would have in bettering American society (1922:374). For these writers, progress depended on social control and adjustment of individuals, and such measures obviously required knowledge about human action. The social scientist, as social engineer, seemed to be the “savior” (Kaplan 1956). These critics shared Schiller’s idea that “a pragmatically efficient Psychology might actually invert the miracle of Circe, and really transform the Yahoo into a man” (1924:64).

Many psychologists held similar expectations for the social benefits of psychology. Their belief in the social relevance of psychological knowledge to social betterment emerged in efforts to promote applied psychology and to develop theories that suggested procedures for modifying society (Danziger 1979; O’Donnell 1979; Samelson 1979; Sokal 1980, 1981). Many psychologists expressed firm convictions that psychology was essential to a better society, and like other intellectuals, they viewed the psychologist as an indispensable expert for building an orderly and adjusted social world.

Most of the theories stipulating social improvement contain three claims: that democracy could be improved by maintaining social order and by adjusting the individual to society; that psychology occupied a unique status among the sciences as the only means of attaining such ends; and that the psychologist had a special responsibility as an expert in these tasks. Psychological researchers agreed that “social problems” such as family organization, civics, and sex life all required psychological expertise (Allport 1924; Bogardus 1924; Cattell 1927, 1930; Dunlap 1920, 1928; Terman 1922a, b; Judd 1926). Probably no psychologist’s pronouncements on these matters carried more fervor than James McKeen Cattell’s:

Psychology, not less than other sciences, perhaps more than any one of them, is concerned with problems of human welfare. The nation, the family, schools, churches, courts, prisons, armies—these are all institutions which aim by emotional and rule of thumb methods to alter individuals and to control their behavior. When we have knowledge and understanding concerning institutions and individuals and learn how to apply knowledge and understanding for their betterment, it will be the product of a science of psychology (1929:345).
For Joseph Jastrow and others the obligation was a special one that implored the psychologist to "join the small remnant of creative and progressive thinkers who can see even this bewildering world soundly and see it whole. Such is part of the psychologist's responsibility" (1928:436). Hall, McDougall, and Watson belong on this list of involved psychologists, for their utopias, as well as other writings, elucidate psychologists' ultimate contribution to a better world.

Controlling and Adjusting Social Life

The confident expositions of psychology were not without specific theories for guiding everyday life. The social-psychological theories frequently dictated the appropriate forms of social control, order, and individual adjustments, particularly as they regarded family relations. For instance, applied psychology textbooks published between 1925 and 1933 generally claimed that adjustment and control of individuals provide the means to an orderly society and personal fulfillment (Napoli 1980). Theories of social work reflected similar ideas in a shift from emphasizing the environment to individual mental processes and their control (Lubove 1965). In psychologically oriented texts, social structures rarely received critical examination; rather, researchers concentrated on altering individual behavior in accordance with the existing structure of the school, the home, or the workplace.

The research of one psychologist, Floyd Allport, exemplifies these values and associated remedies for social life. Allport's Social Psychology is especially pertinent for it views social adjustment from a behaviorist perspective and represents a transition from relatively informal, intuitive theories of social action to more scientific, objective, and experimental ones. Allport's decision to examine social adjustments was defended in his stating that "Ordery social life necessitates a certain degree of subordination of individuals to one another and to the regulated institutions of society. Without such control unity and coordination would be impossible" (1924:591). Social control would serve family life, industry, and politics—a democratic social order—such that "a nice balance of socialization and adjustment is therefore required within the individual." (p. 427).

The terms "social order" and "adjustment" only vaguely construe the optimal social life that Allport and other psychologists envisioned; they receive more precise definition in his theory of social psychology. Allport postulated that individuals acquire behaviors through stimulus-response processes of learning such that "social behavior" becomes any response of an individual that is evoked by another individual. Allport defined any conflicts between these social behaviors and the demands of individual behavior as "the problem of adjustment between the individual and society" (p. 338). Resolution of these conflicts is essential to social order and harmony for "Wholesome expression of the vital activities in each individual must work hand in hand with the socialization of his behavior for the sake of others" (p. 427). For the truly moral person, "the right is identical with the welfare of all, not with the desire of his particular faction" (p. 429).

Successful conflict resolution relates to adjustment and happiness through the family system, because the family provides the primary source of individual well-being and is the institution that prepares one for social life. It is the bulwark of society and the mode for socialization, a chief element in social control processes. Just as socialization in childhood is an essential prophylactic for social conflict, so problems in adulthood result from social adjustment failures. While admitting that sex differences are "more probably due" to learning, Allport believed that marital dis-harmony and, ultimately, family breakdown are the failure to adjust the differences between husband and wife (especially in sexual relations). Therefore, in addition to providing socialization, the family ensures its own future stability by modeling the appropriate arrangements between the sexes (pp. 348–49).

Allport's conceptions were similar to those of concurrent theorists who proposed that the family is the primary mechanism for preparing an individual to adjust to social demands (see Angell 1929; Elmer 1932; Jastrow 1928; Krueger and Reckless 1931; Rueteñer and Runner 1931). With Allport, these psychologists, sociologists, and social psychologists shared several other assumptions. They concurred that the family is universal and that its most natural form is the nuclear family, and when describing the socialization of children within the family, they emphasized the role of the mother. Consequently, failures in socialization were typically interpreted as failures of mothers. These assumptions inti-
mate an implicit preference for studying only adult relationships between men and women that concerned the nuclear family.

There was also considerable consensus that the American family was in a state of crisis and that without some intervention it faced serious trauma and possibly collapse. Since the family was thought to form the bulwark of society, the consequences would be enormous. Whether a theorist stressed internal psychological or external social and economic causes of family crisis, psychological expertise was believed necessary to restore healthy and orderly family relations. In one study reporting that only 96 of 200 married men and women were happy, the authors suggested that “Some of us feel that if we were permitted to train the management, fewer of the exploring children would get hurt, and more of them would find the happiness they are looking for” (Hamilton and MacGowan 1928:287).

The Vicissitudes of Historical Reflection

Like the three utopian psychologists, Allport and his contemporaries detected problems in American culture, urged their remediation by adjusting individuals to the appropriate social order, and identified the nuclear family as central to these modifications. Psychologists were seen as crucial figures for administering remedial treatments, and in their pronouncements on social life and social controls, psychologists themselves exemplified some of the intellectual sentiments about the necessity of expertise in post-World War I reform. Their works, fiction and nonfiction, stipulated systems for bettering relations between men, women, and children.

The present study has attempted to better understand psychologists’ thinking about women, men, and children during a brief period in America’s past. The parallels found between these psychological treatises and reform ideals broaden our understanding of the apparently sudden rise in theories of social relations; in psychologists’ concern about marriage, childrearing, and the family; and in proposals on psychology’s responsibility in upgrading American social life. They permit us to see the connectedness of intellectual and social thought such that, for instance, Watson’s pleas to remedy social disasters with behavioral controls can be seen not simply as anomalous actions of an eccentric but as one of many attempts to use psychology for social progress. The history of psychology, then, must extend beyond internal and intellectual accounts of events in order to make sense of psychology’s intellectual accomplishments and its social impact.

The use of history to better understand and evaluate theories of the family, childrearing, and close relations has been advocated by both historians and psychologists (Gadlin 1978; Mechling 1975; Rothman 1971; Sears 1975; Skolnick 1975; Tananishi 1978; Vincent 1951). It is generally agreed that such studies punctuate the assumptions and social values that circumscribe psychological theories. However, such historical reflection has yet to be linked directly with examinations of contemporary research. There is considerable evidence that current theorizing on the family and close relationships belies any serious reflection on normative assumptions or values. For instance, research continues to tender debatable predictions about the imminent demise of the nuclear family (Uzoka 1979), and family therapists persist in a fairly uncritical use of traditional Freudian models of the family (see Hamilton 1981). Studies indicating a correlation between marriage and depression in women have spawned controversies over their implications for clinical practice and family stability such that some suggest protecting the family at the cost of the women’s well-being (Gove 1980a, b; Johnson 1980). Similarly, the androgyny theories that were originally posited to correct value biases in sex-role research are themselves vulnerable to criticism for their implicit values: the current androgyny model assumes that the healthy individual is independent, self-sufficient, motivated by situational demands, and retains a stable gender profile through the adult years (Morawski 1982; Sampson 1977).

Within psychology the relation of values to theory is a far from resolved issue. Historical inquiry may not settle these quandaries but offers both an instrument and vocabulary with which they can be negotiated. As such, historical study is one mode from which we can initiate critical examination of our science. The requests for such reflection come from various theoretical contingents, yet they nevertheless concur that, in neglecting implicit values and beliefs, psychology has persisted in presenting borrowed images, models of not quite perfect worlds (Argyris 1975; Buss
1975, 1977; Israel 1972; Moscovici 1972; Samelson 1980; Sampson 1977, 1978; Sarason 1981; Shotter 1975). Critical thinking, whether initiated through historical reflection or some other method, enables us to identify what psychological images of human nature are actually perpetuated and marketed and to contemplate what images are ultimately possible.

Notes


2. Galton's utopia, *Kantsaywhere*, never appeared in print, although he tried to publish it before his death. In settling Galton's estate, his niece destroyed those sections of the manuscript that she found scandalous (primarily for its content on sexual matters). The remainder was forwarded to Karl Pearson, who published it in his biography of Galton (Pearson 1914-38).

3. In introducing "The Island of Eugenia," McDougall (1921) claimed that he actually designed it some twenty years earlier.

4. The unpublished version of Watson's utopia is slightly longer and somewhat more adamantine about enforcing behaviorist principles. I thank Cedric Larson for presenting me with a copy of the unpublished work.

References


