

Mary whiton calkins - women in psychology biography

[Education](#), [University](#)



Mary Whiton Calkins grew up in a male dominated society. This was during the late 1800s and early 1900s when almost every one was a male chauvinist. She had to struggle through out her education especially in 1884 when her younger sister died and her mother's health condition deteriorated forcing her to drop out of school for a year. When her sister, Mauda, died she spent the entire year tutoring her two young brothers. During this hard period she also studied Greek. During her life she put adequate effort and determination worth inspiring. (Zedler, 1995). This is noticed in her contribution to the then new field in science of psychology. This kind of society did not deter her from setting goals, achieving them as well as championing for women rights in the society. Mary was born in Hartford, Connecticut on 30th march 1863. She grew up in buffalo to a close knit white family of seven. Her dad was clergy in Presbyterian Church within buffalo, in 1810 he was moved to Newton Massachusetts were he lived with his family (zedler, 1995). Mary attended a local elementary school and she studied Germany in private lessons. At the age of seventeen, Mary joined Newton high school (Furumoto, 1980).

During her times there was the theory that women were intellectually inferior to men hence higher levels of learning were harmful to women (Goodwin, 2008). Women had their entire life spent in the house where the married took care of their husbands while the unmarried had to take care of the ageing family. Hence women career was marriage. Due to the societal views on women capabilities only few made it through high education. Mary

Whiton Calkins was amongst the rare women who not only pursued high education but also made impact in the field of psychology.

At turning seventeen Mary joined Smith College in western Massachusetts. This was soon after her parents moved to Boston area. She had enrolled to pursue a bachelor's degree in philosophy and classics . she encountered many challenges in her college life. The worsened health condition of her mother and the death of her sister derailed her graduation by one year. She however graduated in 1885. Mary had a life time experience in Europe with her family for about sixteen months, upon which she further studied Greek.

Mary was a multi linguist despite of her parent's ability to speak Germany only. She could fluently speak English, Germany, French and Greek.

(Furumoto, 1980). This was a significant step in her life; she could travel to different parts of Europe especially Italy and Greece. (Zedler, 1995)

Mary returned to Wesley and had an opportunity to teach Greek at Wesley College. This was a liberal arts college for women. Mary took her career at Wesley seriously; this highly impressed her professors. It was at this time when she was approached by a professor in the department of philosophy to consider teaching in the disciple of psychology. (Zedler, 1995). The laboratory approach to psychology was a new discipline then. This was the turning point of her career. It was during this time when women were considered unable to pursue high education. This greatly frustrated her efforts as she tried to search for a university to further her education. At first she considered pursuing her education in Europe, but, after reading her

friends letter she changed her mind. Bumb (n. d). She had realized that the education in Germany despised women. Mary was a brilliant woman who could not just give up things easily. She broadened her search for an education that could fully benefit her in the United States.

In her search for a university, Mary, considered Michigan and Yale. Back In her mind she thought of working under known psychologist John Dewey and G. Ladd. Her intentions later changed on realizing that these two universities lacked a psychology laboratory which was core in the new discipline. Mary looked further and opted for Harvard University. This university had developed a laboratory in her field of interest.

Professors William James and Josiah Royce of Harvard University made invitations to Mary to attend their lectures on informal basis. Mary was not satisfied with this informal arrangement. This prompted her to write a letter to the president of the Harvard University requesting to attend classes on formal basis. However her request was declined. With the help of her father and the president of Wesley College, she appealed against this decision.

On the beginning of October in 1890, her petition was approved. This only recognized her as a formal guest of the university. She did not have the privilege to register but only to attend lectures. She received private tuition as many of students could not attend lectures because of the presence of a woman. Mary under the guidance of Edmund Sanford of Clark University, she studied experimental psychology. She attended each lecture learning new concepts each time.

On the eve of 1891, Mary returned to Wesley College. Mary became an instructor of psychology in the department of philosophy. Mary continued with her quest for more knowledge, she presented a thesis “ An experimental research on the association of ideas” to the graduate committee. Her paper was approved but she was denied a degree by the Harvard University. In 1898, Mary became a full professor.

Mary’s theoretical perspective was on the concept self psychology. She defined self psychology as the study of conscious people or oneself. Her perspective was greatly influenced by James. Mary was for the idea that all conscious is personal therefore it is impossible to fully define self because these qualities or association are quite unique and in flux to every person. She differentiated self psychology with the other forms of psychology e. g. psychological atomism on the basis that they excluded conscious self component which is critical in study of “ self” (McDonald). Her view was a like to the one of her teacher William James that a person engages one self in an endless process of scrutiny through perception and therefore association is the main function of the mind. She expounded on this arguing that this is not just an intellectual conviction but a spiritual and moral one. Her theory was greatly despised at first and it was only through her championing that made this theory to see the right of the day. The theory lack of popularity was due to strong moral interconnection of man (Wentworth, 1997)

She was against the theory of women intellectual inferiority to men thus she expressed this through her career. (Furumoto, 1980)

Mary had significant impact in her new field of psychology. Her contributions to the field started right way when she was still in Harvard when she first wrote a paper suggesting some necessary contribution to the book “ James first principles of psychology” which later James (her lecture) used to revise his book.

Mary initiated the psychological laboratory at Wellesley College where she was lecturing in the new discipline. This was the first laboratory of its kind in a women college. In setting it up she consulted widely with her teachers. William James gave her a hand on dissecting sheep brains, Edmund c. Stanford gave her extensive technical advice on apparatus (Furumoto, 1980).

She taught various students in her new laboratory. In 1891-1892 she guided them in dissecting a sheep’s brain. They conducted studies on association attention and even memory reaction time.

Mary wrote an article in American journal describing her psychology life where she reported on how she used first-hand material and apparatus to study numerous topics. This was later followed by several articles on experiments conducted by herself and her students. Their studies had focused on children emotional life, psychological aesthetic stories, dreams among other topics (Furumoto, 1980).

Dream Research: While she was still a student Mary carried out a research project with help of her teacher on dreams. They collected dreams from many people and analyzed them whereby they found a close link between

people's life and the kind of dreams they experience (Furumoto, 1980). Her research was greatly opposed by the newly- accepted Freudian view of dreams. Her research saw the green light again when Freudian dreams analysis was attacked due to its emphasis on hidden meanings

Paired-Associate Technique: The research method of paired technique she employed in perusing her doctorate has brought great impact. Her method involved pairing some numbers with bright colors and others with neutral colors. She revealed that the numerical associated with warm colors were remembered better than their counterparts. However the prime factor influencing remembrance was the frequency of exposure. This method is still of great help today

Books and Writing: Mary wrote intensively during her career. She wrote an estimate of sixty eight articles in psychology. She wrote several books . e. g. " The persistent problem in philosophy" and " The good man and The Good" in 1907 and 1918 respectively (Zedler, Beatrice 1995).

Mary also served as the president of American psychological association in 1905. She published an autobiography in 1930 aimed at converting.

Though Mary lived in days of female dispensation she left land mark in the field of psychology and great challenge to women.

References

Furumoto, Laurel (1991). Portraits of Pioneers in Psychology. In G. A. Kimble, M. Wertheimer & C. White (Ed.), *From " Paired Associates" to a Psychology*

of Self: The Intellectual Odyssey of Mary Whiton Calkins" (pp. 57-72).

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Goodwin, J. C. (2008). *A history of modern psychology*, (Third Edition) John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

McDonald, D. N. (2007). Differing concepts of personhood within the psychology and philosophy of Mary Whiton Calkins. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 43, No. 4, Indiana University Press.

Zedler, Beatrice (1995). " Mary Whiton Calkins." In M. E. Waithe (Ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers: Vol. 4* (pp. 103-123). Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publisher