Leta Hollingworth:
Champion of the Psychology of Gifted Children
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Leta Hollingworth (1886-1939), one of the most original pioneers of educational psychology, successfully challenged the prevalent scientific doctrine of women's inferior intelligence. Her genius was in the field of gifted education, offering a new standard and textbook in this area. In her tenure at Teachers College, Columbia University, she contributed significantly to the study of giftedness, intelligence psychology, and specific disabilities, as well as 80 scholarly publications. As the first psychologist in New York City, she helped to establish the professional standards for the field and was one of the few academicians who promoted and provided much-needed chiselled services in the school. She was a new woman to psychology, and the standards for research are exemplary even in modern times. Leta was a conspicuous early leader in educational psychology who has finally begun to receive the recognition she deserves.

BEGINNINGS

I was born May 22th, 1886, Tuesday morning at 12:30. Grandma and Mrs. Brasier dressed me then Mrs. Olin took me to the best of my memory was laying on the sofa to see me. She took me in her arms, kissed me, and said, "A little girl; isn’t she sweet?"

Now it was Friday and I had not seen my Papa yet. I was beginning to think I had no Papa or he was not very anxious to see his little girl. Uncle Wiley sent him another telegram. (Your daughter is crying for her papa.)

Wednesday morning I heard Grandma tell Mamma that she saw somebody walking up the road with a white hat on. Mamma said, "Maybe it’s my Johnny." Then I heard the door open—and there was Papa. He said, "Johnny, give your hat to your grandmother's cage. School was the only refuge from the "furry furnace." (H. L. Hollingworth, 1943, p. 53). He described as her home life and devoted all her energies to learning. Before she was 10 years old, she made a "solemnly kept compact with life." (M. J. Hollingworth, 1943, p. 44).

That I left out part of childhood I should be granted other values which seemed to be desirable. I decided to grow up there and there, somehow reposing the rest of childhood.

That is what the story is, and I have nothing left. The story is in the assurance that he were in some way lacking. (L. Hollingworth, 1908, cited in H. L. Hollingworth, 1943, p. 72)

Leta graduated from Valentine High School, Valentine, Nebraska, in 1903. In the following:

She used to frequent a remote stack room in the library, where the heavier volumes on anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and social sciences were kept. She often spent hours in the room, if people at all, contained bored adult graduate students and a few undaunted major professors and philosophy. I first observed her on the frequent visits to these quarter sessions.

Wearying a bright scarlet Tam-O’Shanter on her dark hair, and ponies and one another of the gentle beasts. She brought a new and brighter note into the drab study room. (p. 63)

After Harry Hollingworth graduated, he became an assistant in the Laboratory of Columbia University, and Leta and Harry L. Hollingworth were married in New York City, December 11, 1908. A precious couple in the history of psychology, Harry became a somewhat reluctant leader in applied psychology (Benjamin, 1988) and Leta because of her wonderful interest in both the psychology and the psychology of gifted children, both of which were unpopular causes. However, these were not Leta’s original ambitions. As a young woman, Leta had decided to be a writer. The earliest record of her writing talent is a poem she composed at the age of 14 years, "Love Poem," which was printed in the Yattonian daily newspaper. (Terman, 1944) remarked that the poem "comes favorably with the best juvenilia that has ever been published in this school," and Leta studied literature and writing at the University of Nebraska and was esteemed for her contributions as literary editor of The Daily Nebraskan, associate editor of The Student Union, and assistant editor of The Senior Book. In a letter to Harry Hollingworth in 1906, at the age of 20 years, she expressed her youthful belief that any work worth writing would eventually be published.

Do you really think that I could "write?" Somehow I always feel the quotation marks around that word. There is an ineptitude in the world which prevents me from associating it with the inefficient aspiring youth, ungrammatical maidens, "local poets," and English Club members: all those who feel spasmodic up-wellings of emotion, and imagine that this is a reason why these experiences should be chronicled on paper.

But what things are required of one who will really "write?" The poet must be a natural; he must not think twice about his words. He must have all that goes on his face is visible to others. He must learn the truth of the world and the people who make it up in some way... and peculiarly helpful and satirical aspects of the sphere of life."

Then the problem of "demand" for written work seemed to be as much of a problem. If a thing is worthy, it will find its place. If one’s effort is not the expression of life, let him rest calm in the assurance that they were in some way lacking. (L. Hollingworth, 1908, cited in H. L. Hollingworth, 1943, p. 72)

Leta began her writing career with a series of short stories, a few newspaper articles, and despite several attempts, she was unable to get the stories published, so this dream was shattered. She taught school for 2½ years in Nebraska before joining the staff of the New York Times, and she assumed that she could help support the two of them by continuing her teaching. Then she discovered that married women were being expected to do everything and hold jobs in the schools of New York City. She applied for scholarships and fellowships to obtain a graduate degree in literature, and these doors were also closed to her. She tried her hand at housework and sewing, but her frustration mounted daily until she would burst into tears with no apparent cause. Discouraged and puzzled by the role society had laid out for her, Leta Hollingworth began to ponder the "woman question". (L. S. Hollingworth, 1926, p. 348). Inequality of women’s opportunities in society. At this point she shifted the focus of her career from literature to education and sociology.

The opportunity for Leta to begin graduate study came about as the result of a research grant from Coca-Cola in 1911 (Benjamin, 1988). The Coca-Cola Company was being used by the government for producing a beverage that contained caffeine, which was thought to be dangerous to one’s health. It was famed to the researchers to lend McKee Catell to study the effects of caffeine, but he declined and eventually the request reached Harry Hollingworth, who accepted. Harry began the study.

During her youth, Harry Hollingworth remarked that she had the benevolent and pleasant aspect of his academy, and that she showed no deleterious effects of caffeine. Ironically, in his later years, Harry Hollingworth remarked that despite the Coca-Cola company’s grand gesture, she emerged from the experience as a skilful researcher, ready to apply her training to a much larger issue.

The "Woman Question"

In the first epoch of Leta Hollingworth’s career, from the time she began graduate school in 1911, until her first faculty appointment in 1916, she was major occupied with the difficulties experienced by professional women. Everywhere she observed barriers, overt or tact, between women and such as the director of the study. This was occurring that she expanded her dissertation and completed 2 years before she obtained her doctoral degree. Functional Periodicity: An Experimental Study of the Mental and Motor Abilities of Women During Menstruation (L. S. Hollingworth, 1914a) challenged the medical and social practices that allowed for the alleviation of women’s menstrual cycles, and determined that several of the claims could be investigated empirically.

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Thorkildie's position on women's intelligence. Thorkildie was a vocal proponent of the doctrine of greater male variability, which suggested that more men than women would be counted among the gifted and retarded. The variability hypothesis was also a legacy of Charles Darwin (1879). From his research, Darwin concluded that the male dominance of all species was more advanced on the evolutionary scale than the female members because of greater variability in secondary sexual characteristics. It was clear to him that women were inferior to men intellectually, as so few women had attained knowledge.

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man's attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever sphere of industry the thinker requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. (Darwin, 1879, p. 364)

Nearly 40 years later, Thorkildie echoed this sentiment. In his seminar, "Preclinical Psychological Examination in 1910, Thorkildie wrote the following:"

The sexual difference between the central tendency of men and that of women which is the common finding of psychological tests and school reports is at variance with the position that the facts in the great achievements of the world in science, art, invention, and management, women have been far excelled by men. One who accepts the equality of typical (i.e., normal) representatives of the two sexes must assume the burden of ignoring the great differences in the high range of achievement.

The probable true explanation is to be sought in the greater variability within the male sex. In particular, if men differ in intelligence and energy by wider degrees than do women, eminence and leadership of the world affairs of which will not necessarily bring fame to either sex. They will often deserve it. (p. 35)

In an earlier work, "Sex in Education," Thorkildie (1906) warned that pregraduate instruction for women was a poor imitation of that needed for education in such professions as "nursing, teaching, medicine and architecture" (p. 213) in which average intelligence was considered sufficient. A "slighter degree of average intelligence would mean that of the hundred most gifted individuals in this country not two would be women and residing in the state of New York, therefore obscuring an accurate count." (p. 194)

Thorkildie's assertions were the central focus of a 21-page critique, also published in the The American Journal of Sociology 2 years before she graduated.

Thorkildie has gone farther than almost any other man of science in declare that women's failure may to some extent be due to her own ignorance. He stated that women were more ready to think that "we should first exhaust the known physical causes" before engaging in any assumption of mental deficiency in women's lack of awakening. But have these "known causes" been enough to account for the manifest fact that women are less able to reason, observe, and bear and the children, and that this has always meant and still means that nearly 100 per cent of all men are gifted in the performance and supervision of domestic and allied tasks; a field where eminence is impossible. Only when we had exhausted this fact as an explanation of the question of comparative variability, or as differences in intelligence or in the science of sex, did we find the answer for the women's failure to study the cause of failure in the most obvious facts, and announce the conclusion consequent upon such knowledge. (L. S. Hollingworth, 1910b, pp. 327-328)

Either the atmosphere in academia was very different 68 years ago or Hollingworth was an incredibly courageous graduate student and Thorkildie a most tolerant advisor. It seems doubtful that this type of public attack on the cherished beliefs of one's mentor ever occurred in that Turin. Perhaps Thorkildie had seen a keen appreciation of his student's audacity because it matched his own. When Thorkildie joined the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University, as an assistant professor in 1898, he apparently took great pleasure at the opportunity to attack what he felt was not at all intimidating to the first-generation psychologists (Jonnies, 1986). It is a credit to Thorkildie that he and Hollingworth became good friends; they even purchased a home together, "the Old Bend," on the Hudson River (personal communication, R. Thorkildie, October 2, 1988).

Dismantling the Variability Hypothesis

Just as she was completing her master's degree, Hollingworth was offered a position administering mental tests in a clinic for the mentally retarded. This provided an opportunity (for the first time) to collect data on the variability of the sexes. Hollingworth's first published study, in 1913, "The Frequency of Mental Defectives Among Children 6 to 12 Years Old," was published in Psychological Review. But instead of accepting one of the hypotheses that there are substantially more retarded male than female children and adults. She demon- strated that 72% of mental defectives are orphans, 41% of mental defectives fail to show up in the younger age groups, by the age of 16, the situation reversed itself, and nearly 50% of the students were mentally normal. She defined intelligence as "mental age of 12, whereas she measured intelligence by mental age of 6, by means of house- hold..." (p. 194)

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adjustment problems occur. “Persons who deviate widely from the mean of human intelligence tend to become ‘iso-
lates’” (L. S. Hollingworth, 1940b, p. 272). She developed a special interest in the socialization process and the re-education of gifted children. The “client-centered therapy” was a derivative (Kerr, 1990). Rog-
ers (1961) recalled her as a “sensitive and practical person” who “turned the tables” on being a victim of her environment. The lack of support from within the academic community.

Although Hollingworth and Terman held similar views in many respects, they differed in one very fundamental way. Terman believed that giftedness was primarily hereditary and that one need only study the individual to see how the phenomenon evolved. Hollingworth, however, believed that heredity was the tip of the iceberg. She believed that the opportunity and education were the critical factors in the development of potential. What a person can do may depend on congenital endowments, but she or she “acts” how she does depend on [the] environment” (L. S. Hollingworth, 1976c, p. 14).

Even Terman was basically interested in the description of giftedness. Hollingworth wanted to determine how to teach gifted students more sensitively and how to help them develop their potential. She believed that teaching gifted students was more of an educational challenge than a problem of selecting a small group of students.

The work of both Hollingworth and Terman was crucial to the development of educational psychology and the understanding of gifted individuals. Hollingworth’s focus on the development of gifted children’s social and emotional development, as well as her emphasis on the importance of a supportive and nurturing environment, set the stage for future research in the field.

Hollingworth’s work on the gifted has had a lasting impact on the field of educational psychology. Her research has contributed to our understanding of the unique needs of gifted students and has led to the development of effective educational strategies for their success.

In conclusion, the life and work of Leta Hollingworth have left a lasting legacy in the field of educational psychology. She was a pioneer in the study of giftedness and her contributions have helped shape the way we understand and educate gifted individuals today.

References:
are still being neglected in the public schools, and only those from affluent families can take advantage of privately sponsored enrichment programs or private schools. Bright students from underprivileged families suffer the most from the lack of public support for the gifted.

Hedrick Hollingsworth clearly embraced the plight of gifted children for the lion's share of her career. traces of her earlier mission were to be found in many of her writings. She returned to "the woman question" often, linking it with her study of the gifted:

Stated briefly, "the woman question" is how to reproduce the species and at the same time to work, and make work really a full reward, in accordance with individual ability. This is a question primarily of the gifted, for the discontent with and resentment against a man's work have originated when women's ability was excessively endowed with intellect. (L. S. Hollingsworth, 1916).

In her last articles, L. S. Hollingsworth (1939c) shared this final wisdom about the contribution of educational psychology's mental testing movement to the future of society:

All the knowledge that has been gained since 1916 is and is a goodly amount. It is enough to modify education and social-economic procedure radically, if it becomes generally disseminated and accepted. These facts would be epoch-making, if as quickly to the limit of their power to apply. For a long time people will not believe in them, will be afraid of them, will not know what to do about them, but in the end the truth will be admitted and utilized, as everything is finally utilized that has power to bring about human life. (p. 790)

It is encouraging that Hollingsworth is being rediscovered five decades after her death and that she is being restored to her proper place in the history of educational psychology, the psychology of women, and the psychology of gifted children. However, were she to observe contemporary society, she would not be surprised. As we find in the past 50 years there has been so little progress in changing social attitudes toward the gifted, and that women, particularly gifted women, still face barriers that they cannot achieve or recognize.

The "woman question" remains unresolved, as Reis and Caihlan (1989) pointed out, "bright women are clearly adult underachievers" (p. 5), and programs for gifted children are often once again being eliminated in favor of equality of outcomes, rather than the reality of ability differences. Much work remains to be done in both of these areas. Leta Stetter Hollingsworth was a courageous pioneer in two unexplored fields, and the realization of her vision will require courage and determination from those who follow in her path.

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