

You too can be healthy, successful, and happy

Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr revisits the promises of British practical psychology

One hundred and fifty years ago this month, the grand new bell – a mind-boggling 16 tons in weight – rang out across London from the Great Clock of Westminster for the first time on 31 May 1859. It was heard in the offices of John Murray at 50 Albemarle Street, one of England's most distinguished publishers. The great bell, nicknamed Big Ben, would not fare well, cracking after two months, and then languishing in repair for three years. But for John Murray, 1859 was to be a banner year. His publishing house, home to Jane Austen, Washington Irving, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Lord Byron, would publish two books of great significance that year.

One of these books was released on 22 November and by the end of the day, all 1250 copies had been sold. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* would alter the world view more than any other book published in the last 400 years. The other book, although not as earth-shaking, sold more than 20,000 copies by the end of its first year. The author was Samuel Smiles and his book, *Self-Help; with Illustrations of Character and Conduct*, would spark a self-improvement industry that today seems to know no bounds in books and magazines, and on television, talk radio and the internet. Almost immediately after its publication, the book made Samuel Smiles a celebrity. *Self-Help* was widely translated, making him an international authority on character development.

Smiles's self-help book, with an

emphasis on positive thinking, was one of many sources of psychological help offered to the public in the 19th century. There were phrenologists examining head shapes, physiognomists studying their clients' facial characteristics, graphologists looking at handwriting, and palm readers peering at life lines. These practitioners offered vocational and marital advice, promised cures for melancholia and phobias, and provided lessons for personal happiness and business success. They not only serviced their individual clients but they franchised their operations, establishing schools, degree and certificate programmes, and publishing books, magazines, and brochures to promote their practices.

The 1920s

In the aftermath of World War I there was an accelerated interest in psychology as

individuals sought to make sense of their lives and their world. Newspaper columnists and self-help gurus told their readers that they could not lead happy and successful lives without the knowledge afforded by the new science of psychology. Science populariser Albert Wiggam (1928) advised his readers that 'Men and women never needed psychology so much as they need it today. Young men and women need it in... choosing their careers early and wisely... businessmen need it to help them select employees; parents and educators need it as an aid to rearing and educating children; all need it in order to secure the highest effectiveness and happiness (p.13). English writer H.G. Wells (1924)

offered a similar message: 'The coming hundred years or so will be, I believe, essentially a century of applied psychology. It will mark a revolution in human affairs altogether more profound and more intimate than that merely material revolution of which our grandparents saw' (p.190).

With the decline in respectability of the pseudoscientific psychologies of the 19th century, the public looked to the new science of

psychology as the guiding source for happiness and prosperity. Practitioners of phrenology and physiognomy were replaced by practitioners of the new psychology. These individuals, with no academic training in psychology, saw their psychology as the true psychology and offered themselves as translators and conduits of the esoteric laboratory-based

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psychology. Their mission was to provide psychological truths in ways that could be used by ordinary citizens, a task that they believed was beyond the skills of academic psychologists. They called their psychology 'practical psychology' and argued that it held the keys to a fulfilling life. Practical psychology would be a scientific force to enlighten the masses, and it would do so via a recruitment and organisational effort – the practical psychology movement – designed to provide a ready market for the products of practical psychology, namely magazines, books, speakers, classes, home-study courses, and conferences. With an alleged emphasis on the scientific underpinnings of psychology, the first of the British practical psychology magazines defined practical psychology as 'the application to the problems of everyday life of the scientific principles discovered after long periods of psychological investigation and laboratory research' (Anonymous, 1924, p.2).

The practical psychology movement

Historian Mathew Thomson (2001) has written that the appeal of practical psychology was that it made itself 'attractive to a broad spectrum of people, ranging from convinced Christians to those looking for a wholly secularised religiosity' (p.121). It was described as the 'sane exposition of Psychology from the definitely Christian standpoint as the basis upon which the whole structure of human character must rest' (Anonymous, 1924, p.3). Practical psychology was touted as an advancement over religion: 'Modern Practical Psychology is an enlargement of Christianity to the point that it may minister to every human need both spiritual and temporal... The fundamental truths of Christianity were faith, love, peace, joy, power, truth, spiritual healing; and Psychology came along to show us how to turn these ideals into realities' (Myddleton, 1925, p.3).

Practical psychology was manifested principally in two ways: magazines that promoted the movement while offering essays for a better life, and practical psychology clubs where adherents to the movement could meet regularly. Whereas the magazines would appear and disappear, victims of the economics of small magazines, the psychology clubs

proved to be more enduring and arguably more important for the spread of the movement. Thomson (2006) has described the clubs as a central feature of the movement noting that these clubs 'provided a site for regular lectures and meetings, libraries of psychological literature, courses of self-improvement, and perhaps even therapeutic attention' (p.32).

The first two magazines of the movement appeared in 1924 and 1925. A. Myddleton began publication of *Practical Psychology: Health, Success, Happiness* in October 1924 from his home in Blackpool. It lasted for 14 monthly issues. *The Practical Psychologist*, also a monthly magazine, began publication in London three months later in January 1925 and lasted only a year. Its editors were F. S. Hayburn and Anna Maud Hallam. Hallam was the driving force behind the establishment of the magazine. She had begun the practical psychology movement in the United States in 1921, headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio. She was the author of several books on practical psychology and the founder of the International Anna Maud Hallam Clubs of Practical

Psychology which gathered annually in North America for an international congress. She made trips to England and Scotland in 1922 to establish clubs and made later trips to South Africa and India to organise clubs there as well.

News of activities of these clubs was published regularly in the pages of the magazines.

The Blackpool magazine reported on clubs in Blackpool, Newcastle upon Tyne, Sheffield, Hull, Bradford, Wakefield, Leeds, Halifax, and others. Myddleton was involved in the organisation of these clubs as the Association of Practical Psychology Societies, a group that held its first meeting in Bradford in June 1925. The London magazine reported on clubs organised as the Federation of Practical Psychology Clubs of Great Britain, and

became its 'official organ' in July 1925. Almost all of these clubs acknowledged Hallam as their founder, and she was made Life President of the Federation. News of the clubs – London, Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol, Leicester, Nottingham, and others – appeared regularly in the pages of *The Practical Psychologist*. These news reports consisted of descriptions of their programmes, with some of the clubs meeting weekly, others monthly. They described courses that were offered to members and others. Anna Maud Hallam and her sister Alfaretta were frequent speakers at these clubs, often offering a series of lessons over several days, collecting fees for these classes and selling Hallam's books to attendees.

By the end of 1925, both practical psychology magazines had ceased publication, but the clubs continued to flourish, growing in numbers in the 1930s. In 1933 they organised under the British Union of Practical Psychologists and news of their meetings was reported in a new magazine, *The Psychologist: Personal and Practical Psychology*, edited by Frank Allard, that began publication in London in 1936 and continued into the 1970s (see Perks, 2008). By 1939 there were 53 psychology clubs (Thomson, 2006), and by 1948 there were more than 200 clubs, including clubs in Palestine, Nigeria, Gold Coast, Australia, India, South Africa, Malaysia, and Burma, all organised under the British Union of Clubs. These groups maintained their vitality and their financial viability through courses they offered, home-study courses by mail, and self-help books and pamphlets (Thomson, 2006). For example, Allard organised the publication of more than 20 'Practical Psychology Handbooks' in the 1930s and 1940s on topics such as the inferiority complex, memory, preventing and curing nervousness, getting a good night's sleep, mastering shyness, and making friends. Averaging about 45 pages each, these handbooks were intended to address common psychological problems, and they did so with closer adherence to the science and practice of psychology than

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looking back

was true of much of the earlier magazines' content.

A rival magazine appeared in 1937 using the title *Psychology: Health, Happiness, Success* and continued publication into the 1960s. This magazine changed its subtitle during the war to *Faith, Hope, Courage*. News of psychology clubs continued to be reported in these magazines as late as the 1960s.

Popular vs. professional psychology

Organised British psychology was aware of its public counterpart. In his history of British psychology, Leslie Hearnshaw (1964) devoted less than a page to the practical psychology movement, deriding what he considered its outrageous platitudes, homilies, and promises in a most sarcastic presentation. He concluded that its existence might be attributed to the 'failure on the part of the churches and of the medical profession to fulfill their healing missions' (p.296).

Hearnshaw and the British Psychological Society had been interested in practical psychology, so much so that according to Hearnshaw (personal communication

April 17, 1989) in the 1950s, that the Society commissioned a report on 'these clubs and their publications'. No copy of that report has been found.

There has always been an antagonism between popular psychology and scientific psychology since the latter arrived on the scene at the end of the 19th century. There were early debates within scientific psychology about the advisability of an applied psychology; for example, the position of Edward Bradford Titchener (1914), who argued that applied psychology was not a science but a technology, versus those sympathetic to what has been labelled functionalist psychology, such as James McKeen Cattell, who advocated strongly for a psychology that was publicly useful. He even suggested that this applied psychology be called 'practical psychology' (Cattell, 1921).

Academic psychology ignores popular psychology today at its own peril. In doing so it risks abandoning the psychological questions that are at the

heart of human concerns, a problem noted by many psychologists over the past 100 years (see Pear, 1940). Thomson

(2001, 2006) has addressed this issue as well, yet he concluded his history of British psychology in the first half of the 20th century by acknowledging a

narrowing of the gap between the psychology of academics and that of the people. If one looks at the substance of popular psychology as expressed in the various public media today, it is evident that the gap is still too wide, suggesting only a marginal contact with psychological science. Psychologists need to do a better job of communicating their science and its applicability to the public. They bear much of the blame for keeping their science a secret. In the words of George Miller (1969), they need to do a better job of giving psychology away.

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