

Defining a distinctively British psychology

Graham Richards reflects on William McDougall's influential *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908)

An *Introduction to Social Psychology* (*An Introduction* hereafter) by William McDougall is the most successful British-authored psychology book ever published, the last (23rd) edition being published in 1936 two years before McDougall's death. It remains in print (four reprints since 2000, a 2001 one being introduced by Robert Wozniak); the only other pre-1910 English-language academic psychology text of which this is true is, I think, William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890).

This is, on the face of it, a little odd. For starters, it was not social psychology in the current sense at all, representing a theoretical position which soon vanished from the subdiscipline. Moreover, McDougall was a mind-body dualist, a supporter of eugenics and advocate of purposive, or teleological, explanation within psychology. (He was also briefly in analysis with C.G. Jung, though this broke off in 1914.) In 1908, however, he was the golden boy of British psychology. Never backward in self-promotion or tempted by modesty, he was already the most eminent British psychologist of his generation: a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, later (1913) Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy at Oxford, one the Society's founders, collaborator with W.H.R. Rivers and C. Sherrington, veteran of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits, and Reader at University College under J. Sully. This was his first major book-

length work on psychology, but his journal publications were already extensive.

Culminating the British Darwinian tradition of instinct-based theorising and integrating it with a theory of emotion, its immediate impact is no mystery. It rapidly came to be viewed as a saner British counterbalance to Freud, supporting the notion of unconscious instinctive motivation but casting 'Instinct of Reproduction' as but one of a battery of instincts. Until the end of the 1920s it was regularly cited to this effect, and McDougall was cast as a central figure in the 'New Psychology'. More broadly it must have struck contemporaries as a major step towards the kind of 'total' theory that 20th-century 'scientific' academic psychology promised. In short, *An Introduction* was theoretically innovative, up to speed on contemporary literature and synoptic in range. Let us examine the original edition in a little more detail.

The manifesto-like 'Introduction' lays out the work's rationale, stressing that only following Darwin can the 'Social Sciences' make genuine progress. It repeats his well-known statement, which had first appeared in his brief *Primer of Physiological Psychology* (1905), that '...psychologists must cease to be content with the sterile and narrow conception of their science as the science of consciousness, and must boldly assert its claim to be the positive science of mind in all its aspects and modes of functioning,

or, as I would prefer to say, *the positive science of conduct or behaviour*' (p.15, my italics; all page numbers refer to the first edition). 'Happily', he continues, 'this more generous conception of psychology is beginning to prevail.' He further explains that the first section, dealing 'with the characters of the individual mind', while not social psychology, 'is an indispensable preliminary of all social psychology'. No 'consistent and generally acceptable scheme of this kind has hitherto been furnished', so 'it was necessary to attempt it' (p.17). This section, on which its reputation rests, occupies about two thirds of the ensuing text.

Chapters 2–6 detail his core account of the instincts and their relationships with emotions. Instincts are 'specific tendencies', distinct from 'general or non-specific tendencies'. His discussion of instincts and problems associated with the term is quite sophisticated, including much on their physiological basis (albeit admitting current ignorance on this). Crucially, '(e)ach of the principal instincts conditions...some one kind of emotional excitement whose quality is specific or peculiar to it' (p.47). He identifies seven of these: 'The Instinct of Flight and the Emotion of Fear', 'The Instinct of Repulsion and the Emotion of Disgust', 'The Instinct of Pugnacity and the Emotion of Anger' and 'The Instinct of Curiosity and the Emotion of Wonder', the less obvious instincts of Self-abasement (or Subjection) and Self-assertion (or Self-display), linked to emotions of 'subjection' and 'elation' respectively, and finally 'The Parental Instinct and Tender Emotion'. These yield 'the most definite of the primary emotions', and from them are 'compounded all, or almost all, the affective states that are popularly recognised as emotions' (pp.81–82).

There are though four others, less important in generating emotion but greatly significant for social life. 'The Instinct of Reproduction' is the foremost (discussed with some reference to 'sexual

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jealousy' and 'female coyness'), the others being the 'Gregarious Instinct' and Instincts of 'Acquisition' and 'Construction'. (As an aside, he nowhere explains why what, one assumes, must be a primary 'instinct for food' generates no emotion.) In a footnote (p.52), the James-Lange theory of emotion is rejected, since the activation of an instinct always involves a 'distinct cognition', even if simply a 'sense-perception' in the case of 'purely instinctive' action.

By 1936 these 11 instincts had been supplemented by Instincts of 'Emulation or Rivalry' and 'Laughter', 'Maternal Instinct', 'Moral Instinct', and 'Religious Instinct', bringing the total to 16. McDougall elaborates on how their behavioural expression is affected by circumstances and learning, and how they can (with the exception of flight) interact, generating a spectrum of subtler emotions.

Extremely important in this last regard is the discussion of 'sentiments', a term adopted from Alexander Shand. (Shand's *The Foundations of Character* only appeared in 1914, but he had contributed a chapter on the topic to G.F. Stout's popular textbook *Groundwork of Psychology*, 1905.) We rarely, McDougall says, experience primary emotions. Instead, emotions usually arise from 'simultaneous excitement of two or more of the instinctive dispositions' (p.121). Most emotional language refers to such 'mixed, secondary, or complex emotions' (ibid.). The reason they are so compounded is, as Shand has explained, that 'our emotions, or, more strictly speaking, our emotional dispositions, tend to become organised in systems about the various objects and classes of objects which excite them' (p.122). It is to these systems of 'emotional tendencies' that the term 'sentiment' refers. Paramount exemplars are 'love' and 'hate'. Hate, for example, may involve the instincts of fear, repulsion and pugnacity.

This framework enables McDougall to address a far wider range of emotions than most subsequent psychologists tackle, including 'admiration', 'reverence', 'gratitude', 'scorn', 'envy', 'reproach', 'pity' and 'shame' among others. He also includes 'anxiety', which has since, of course, acquired a more complex status in psychology. Subsequent emotion research has typically focused on a few extreme emotions, saying little about the emotions

colouring everyday life, though even McDougall ignores boredom, impatience and slight irritation. (This section additionally discusses 'sympathy', 'suggestibility' and 'volition', disregarded here.)

Finally he turns to social psychology in Section 2 'The Operation of the Primary Tendencies of the Human Mind in the Life of Societies', looking particularly at the 'Reproductive and Parental Instincts', 'Instinct of Pugnacity'



William McDougall (1871–1938)

and 'Gregarious Instinct'. He also considers the instincts 'through which religious conceptions affect social life', Instincts of 'Acquisition and Construction' and 'Imitation, Play, and Habit'. This section survives far less well, and social psychology soon rapidly diverged from the approach McDougall was trying to promote.

The title of his next book, *Psychology: The Study of Human Behaviour* (1912), now sounds commonplace. But in including the term 'behaviour' (only launched with its current meaning by C. Lloyd Morgan in 1900) he was reinforcing the shift from prioritising 'mind' and 'consciousness', consolidating his image as someone at the forefront of disciplinary developments. The massive 1911 *Body and Mind: A History and Defence of Animism*, also gave him some short-lived philosophical standing.

By 1914 McDougall (born 1871) was into his forties. Grand-Old-Mandom was casting its first rays above the horizon. It was a false dawn. McDougall's post-war career was a slow, if colourful, downward spiral following his acceptance of the unrefuseable William James Chair

at Harvard and 1920 emigration. Out of tune with Harvard psychology – indeed, with most American psychology – he hung on until 1927 before joining Duke University in North Carolina (parapsychologist J.B. Rhine's base), where he remained, ending up researching Lamarckian inheritance and paranormal phenomena. But he stayed as combative and arrogant as ever, attacking behaviourism, psychoanalysis and gestalt psychology alike, while claiming priority for all their good bits. *The Group Mind* (1920), his real 'social psychology', flopped. His *Outline of Psychology* and *Outline of Abnormal Psychology* were successful textbooks, but theoretically they introduced little new. His other publications were, increasingly, populist polemical railings at the failings of modern society, and, as in *Is America Safe for Democracy?* (1921) (*National Welfare and National Decay* in the UK), could be quite racist. While he called his approach 'Hormic Psychology', it was a 'school' with only one member.

Yet, as Boden (2001) has shown, McDougall can still be an insightful and stimulating 'sparring partner' and much remains to be mined in his considerable output. At least a partial vindication of his reputation is now overdue. The consensus remains though that *An Introduction to Social Psychology* was his greatest achievement, a distinctively British general position statement regarding both human nature and psychology's own task, which served as British psychology's sheet-anchor throughout the 1920s. Its successive editions provided the central vehicle via which McDougall continued to develop his position vis-à-vis psychology's ongoing developments – behaviourism, gestalt, Freud and Woodworth all getting a look-in by 1936 (although American social psychology, then rapidly expanding, is hardly mentioned). Even so, its durability remains somewhat enigmatic. Perhaps, as the most fully articulated classic instinct theory, it has become a principle reference point for teaching purposes. Its coverage of the emotions also retains some value for its range and insight. But these are not quite sufficient. Is the answer indeed social psychological, the very fame of its endurance now become self-fulfilling, turning it into psychology's equivalent of *The Mousetrap*?

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