

A Brief History of Psychology at Wesleyan

Barbara Juhasz and Andrea Patalano
Assistant Professors
Department of Psychology
Wesleyan University

In the broadest sense, psychology is the scientific study of the mind and human behavior. As a field, psychology encompasses aspects of both social science and natural sciences. The first psychology laboratory at Wesleyan University was founded in 1894. Wesleyan was quite ahead of its time—the laboratory was established only two years after the founding of the American Psychological Association. Consisting of one small room in South College, this laboratory was among the first 20 of its kind in the United States. However, while founding of the laboratory may be the most tangible early evidence of psychology as a science at Wesleyan, an even earlier interest in the study of the mind began among the university's philosophers. According to David C. McClelland '38, who wrote a pamphlet celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Psychology Department in 1946, "Psychology probably began at Wesleyan as a course in mental philosophy taught by President Wilbur Fisk...in 1831."

The topic of psychology remained in the domain of the Philosophy Department through 1912, at which point it branched off to become its own department. This event represented a transition from reflecting on human thought and behavior as philosophical questions to having experimental methods to explore those questions. Professor Andrew Armstrong in the Philosophy Department brought Raymond Dodge to Wesleyan in 1898. Dodge was made a Professor of Psychology in 1902 and took charge of the department at the end of 1912. Professor Dodge was interested in visual perception and published his first paper in 1899 on the speed at which the eye moves. He published it in *Psychological Review*, which even today is one of the most prestigious journals for psychological research. From this time through the mid-1940's, the department maintained a small faculty of about three individuals, with early faculty often publishing together. One productive laboratory aiding the war effort examined variables affecting motion sickness in naval cadets. These experiments resulted in seven published articles in 1945 alone, each having a title beginning "Wesleyan University Studies in Motion Sickness."

In 1944, the Department of Psychology joined the University's natural science division, with departments such as Chemistry, Physics, and Biology. Affiliation with this division—as opposed to the social science division—was largely due to the fact that, while the field of psychology studies topics in both the social and natural sciences, it uses laboratories and methodologies that are closer to those in the natural sciences. Scientific methods are routinely used in Wesleyan's Psychology Department to address a range of issues of social relevance. Although it is the only department in the natural science division that does not have a PhD program, it has been one of the foremost small departments in the country in research productivity, with over 2000 scholarly articles published by faculty past and present, according to a recent search of the library's psychology database.

The department has grown in size since its initial founding. It has also become more diverse in its research areas. There were a total of 14 faculty members hired between 1937 and 1949. Eleven of these faculty members had research interests in the study of motivation and learning. One faculty member conducted research in social psychology, one in personality and one in general psychology. Starting in the 1950s and continuing through today, faculty members were hired in other areas of psychology including cognitive psychology, psychopathology, educational psychology, developmental psychology, and biological psychology. Today we have laboratories devoted to research on the development of numerical skills, eye movements in reading, decision making and categorization, memory, intelligence, conflict resolution, eating disorders, the development and treatment of addictions, prejudice and discrimination, attitudes toward immigration, cultural phenomena, and gender.

B.J. and A.P.
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