

## CHAPTER 9

# Psychological Theory

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As a practice, psychology is as old as human history. Its most basic concerns have been about the quality of human life. Because most people tend to think of psychology as a modern science, there is a tendency toward believing that psychological theories are also modern. If, however, we understand psychological theory to be grounded in the religious imagination, then the function of psychological theory is seen in a more expansive way. The construction of psychological theory is informed and guided by culture and social location. This essay explores the development of psychology theory, its cultural and religious location, and its use in practical theology as a method of understanding faith in practice.

### Operational Definition of Psychology Theory

Because psychology is a field with multiple schools of thought, it is critical that I state my approach at the outset. I am an African American pastoral psychologist oriented toward the depth tradition of psychology within an African American cultural milieu. My practice of psychology approaches its tenets as a "soft science" and emphasizes the human as subject rather than as object. My interpretive approach is directed by phenomenology. Consequently, I appreciate psychology's philosophical origins. Honoring the historical concerns of the American school of psychology introduced by William James, I value interiority and introspection. Coupled with that, I value the emphases of Anton Boisen, who also saw psychology as intimately related to religiosity and the human document. These features are vital to the African American approach to psychology as well. While the word *psychology* is commonly interpreted as the *study of the mind*, this is but one understanding. In a less etymological definition, *psychology* can also be understood as the *observation of the soul or spirit*.

theology may not appeal to most contemporary psychologists, many accept philosophy as the earliest foundations of modern psychology. Some might even argue that philosophy, physiology, and medicine together produced modern psychology. Nevertheless, a look at the earliest figures reveals that each one brought together multiple fields to develop what became known as the field of psychology. Furthermore, the resulting interdisciplinary work suggests that every theory stresses different attributes of human behavior and attitudes about human nature. The founding figures established four general psychological approaches and a variety of sub-schools: psychoanalytic, behavioral, humanistic, and cognitive schools. Sometimes transpersonal psychology, an approach that attends to spiritual experiences, is added as a fifth school. It has origins in the previous schools, but has developed its own emphases. In every case and era, theory develops in response to social and cultural dynamics and prevailing definitions of human nature.

Wilhelm Wundt is acknowledged as the mid- to late nineteenth-century founder of scientific psychology. Trained as a physician and taught physiology at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, he left Heidelberg to become head of the philosophy department at the University of Leipzig where he founded the first major laboratory for carrying out research in psychology, including the development of analytic introspection. William James, first among US psychologists of the mid nineteenth to early twentieth century, trained as a physiologist around the same time as Wundt, but he did not enjoy the laboratory. This disdain led him to develop a more informal approach to observation. He valued introspection highly, and considered religiosity as an important attribute of living humanly. He is perhaps best known for his classic text *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. His foundational mark is unmistakable. He is to US psychology what Thomas Jefferson is to the United States as its premier Enlightenment thinker.

Wundt and James's coordination of disciplines and values from their respective cultures set the tone for the development of psychology. Just as early American history was marked by revolutionary protest efforts to distinguish America from Europe, James instinctively differentiated himself from Wundt. And since US identity had been framed by ideas of religious freedom and movements, we should not be surprised that US psychology was initially formed by research in religiosity. Just as theory is based upon the observation of human behavior, and human dynamics in the United States were defined through religion, James's theories were clearly constructed through dialogue with US culture.

The religious imagination always functions in the context of a constructed cosmology. Meaning-making, which is never arbitrary, is framed by a desire to create or to maintain order rather than yield to chaos. The cosmological container for the US religious imagination was defined by the idea of freedom. However, operating just beneath the surface of our democratic principles of power and privilege is an abusive substructure of unfreedom. This underside radically influenced psychology's development as a science inasmuch as it was advanced at the same time as the rise of scientific racism. That is, many theories were developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to identify inferiority/superiority based upon the black/white axis (Butler 2006).

G. Stanley Hall was a student of William James and the first to earn a Ph.D. in psychology in the US in 1878. Hall's journey into psychology was, unsurprisingly, marked by religion and theology. Before devoting himself to the full-time study of psychology, he was a divinity student for one year at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Known as the "father of adolescence," he was a pioneer in the "child study" movement and is regarded as the founder of psychology as an organized science, and therefore as responsible for the professionalization of the field on US shores. Hall became the first president of Clark University, remained a scholar and prolific writer, and was instrumental in the development of educational psychology. While president, he organized the "Clark Conference," as it came to be known, which hosted psychologists from around the world in 1909, including Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. A number of critical comments on US race relations were made at this conference. The prevailing opinions, which Hall did not dispute, suggested that US problems were caused by European Americans living too closely to African Americans. As a result, Hall's work framed the development of American psychology for the next generation.

As an outside influence, Sigmund Freud was one of the most influential psychologists on early twentieth-century American psychology. As the father of psychoanalysis, he was committed to exploring the power of the unconscious and to helping people live healthier lives by making unconscious motivations conscious. His theories were attentive to interactions that provoked neurotic behaviors which were mediated by his understanding of the psyche-somatic split. Like many early psychologists, Freud was a physician who began his career as a neurologist. While he never practiced Judaism, he was never far from the cultural effects of his heritage and rabbinic interpretations influenced the development of his theories and his model of the psyche.

During roughly the same period, the learning specialist Edward Thorndike began his work in the area of animal behavior, which he gradually transfigured into experiments on human behavior. His most notable theory, the law of effect, was developed by studying the learning capacity of cats. He proposed that responses are reinforced by their consequences. His work predated that of Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov, who demonstrated that responses could be conditioned. John Watson developed these ideas further when he founded behaviorism in the early twentieth century. While the earliest expressions of US psychology were grounded in introspection and philosophy, Watson, who began his education as a philosophy major, argued that introspection, with its idiosyncratic impressions, inhibited psychology's advancement as a science. He also believed that Thorndike's methods involved too much subjectivity. For psychology to advance, it needed to use objective methods to study observable behaviors. Radically disagreeing with psychoanalysis, Watson developed a new definition of psychology, calling it "the science of behavior." Behavioral psychology does not subscribe to the unconscious because its study is perceived as too subjective. Instead it emphasizes the study of behavior through interaction with environmental conditions that yield measurable results. Simple organisms, which are easier to study, help us understand more complex human behaviors.

Francis Sumner became the first African American to receive a Ph.D. in psychology in 1920. He first earned a BA in English at Clark University where he developed a

relationship with Hall and returned to study race psychology. His dissertation explored the psychoanalysis of Freud and Albert Adler. Regarded as the founder of black (African) psychology, Sumner in his research countered the era's prevailing notions of black inferiority. He focused on issues of equality and justice in an effort to debunk white supremacist psychological theory. To further this work and to educate other African American psychologists, he established a psychology department at Howard University in 1930 and became its first chair.

Abraham Maslow is considered the founder of the humanistic school of psychology. Notable psychologists Harry Harlow and Adler mentored Maslow at a time when psychology had become well established as a field within colleges and universities. His early life experiences led him into his lifelong work, which evolved from the study of primates to reflection on human potential. Best known for his theories of self-actualization, peak experiences, and the hierarchy of needs, he identified his psychology as a "third force" beyond psychoanalysis and behaviorism. He developed his theories during a time of great social and emotional upheaval in the US in which civil disobedience, civil and human rights, protesting injustice, and peace movements defined humanity and social relationships. Humanistic psychology emphasizes what it means to be alive as a human being. Clinging to psychology's philosophical roots, it tends toward phenomenology. As with all humanist perspectives, it holds that people are basically good. Therefore, it seeks to help people develop to their fullest potential. Opposed to the compartmentalization of human functions, humanistic psychologists engage the whole human being as the subject of investigation. They also consider intuition as a valid source of information.

Developing later in the twentieth century, cognitive psychology bears distinct connections to behavioral psychology. It does not subscribe to the unconscious. Yet, believing that behaviorism divorced itself from human warmth, cognitive psychologists tend to leave room for introspection. They focus on mental processes that give behavior a distinctly human character, such as thought and language. Thought and language permit abstractions that can lead to intelligent decision-making within new situations. Cognitive psychologists appreciate the human ability to think about consequences before acting and to use insights from prior experiences. They also consider self-observation, introspection, and self-reports as useful.

Although this list is not exhaustive, it represents critical thinkers and movements that shaped the development of psychology as a science. A more detailed study would show how culture influenced the construction of theory. An even deeper study would reveal how each theorist was informed by or reacted against religion and religious belief systems. Just as each new perspective characterized itself in response to earlier approaches, each theorist negotiated on some level with religious systems that also defined human interaction.

## Gender Concerns and Psychology Theory

Although the presentation of psychology's history is largely a male retelling, many women psychologists have influenced the field. These proto-feminist and feminist psychologists challenged prevailing constructions of psychology theory and constructed

new theories more consistent with their experiences as women. The earliest women to influence US psychology theory in the early twentieth century did so from beyond our shores.

Whereas Freud hoped a son would carry forth his legacy, Anna Freud, his youngest child, was the one to continue his work, although not necessarily in his shadow. She expanded his theories and ventured into new, and sometimes more detailed, expressions. She worked primarily with children and encouraged ego psychology. Erik Erikson's time with her shaped his own legacy. Meanwhile, British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's work with children radically reformed Freudian theories about children's personality development. She shifted Freud's focus on the father as the child's first image to the mother and emphasized the importance of mothering in psychological theory and practice. She is also regarded as one of the co-founders of object relations theory. Karen Horney, a German of Dutch and Norwegian descent, was another psychoanalyst whose work radically differed with Freud's male-focused, male-preferred approach. She emphasized the importance of social and parental (not just paternal) influences for psychological health. She dislodged the theory of penis envy as the central feature of feminine psychological development, attributing it to social rather than biological or libidinal causes, and theorized the importance of motherhood and men's womb envy. In 1930 Horney immigrated to America where she influenced US psychology with her theory of neurosis and introduction of "feminine psychology."

Inez Beverly Prosser, the first African American woman to receive a Ph.D. in educational psychology conferred by the University of Cincinnati in 1933, investigated the social domain of elementary school children and their development. Like most African American psychologists of her day, her work involved battling the social stigma of inferiority attributed to black life. Her research concludes that because white teachers generally carry strong notions of black inferiority, the educational needs of black children are better served by black teachers and an all-black classroom. While this sounds like it affirms segregation, it is a statement about the abusiveness of the educational system designed to affirm white supremacy.

In 1976 Jean Baker Miller provoked a theoretical paradigm shift with the publication of her classic, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1986). She challenged traditional psychoanalysis and its interpretation of social relationships. She not only attended to the lives of women within culture, but was also sensitive to the dynamics of race within American culture. Her work ushered in a new age of women's psychology and challenged the normative gaze that disregarded other cultures.

## Intellectual Partnerships and Psychology Theory

Theory has not only been constructed by individuals in the laboratory, but has also been developed by psychologists who grappled with societal issues, often working as marriage partners. Two notable couples are Kenneth and Mamie Clark and Erik and Joan Erikson.

The Clarks were both students of Sumner at Howard University and both went on to earn Ph.D.s in psychology from Columbia. Kenneth Clark earned his degree in 1940

and Mamie Clark in 1943. In line with Sumner's commitments, they were dedicated to the cause of justice and equality as psychologists who were civil rights activists. Kenneth Clark's work was essential to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which concluded that racial segregation in public education was unconstitutional. He conducted the "doll test" with his wife, and their findings concluded that segregation was psychologically damaging. She went on to critique IQ tests as racially and economically biased toward white children. Together they worked on issues related to racial identification in African American preschool children.

The Eriksons were another married couple whose theoretical work was constructed in full partnership. It is well known that Erik Erikson developed the psychosocial stages of development. Less known is that the couple developed the eight-stage theory together. Joan supported Erik's theoretical inquiries, and after his death added another stage to the life-cycle theory, Old Age, which took into account the increase in life expectancy and that Erik did not live to reflect more fully on the final stage. They are jointly revered for their work on identity and identity crisis.

## Pastoral Psychology Theory

Anton Boisen was a great innovator in pastoral theology in the United States in the mid twentieth century. He stressed the importance of bringing clinical insights to the practice of ministry. A minister who developed a deep interest in psychology and clinical practice, he founded clinical pastoral education. His personal experience as someone who suffered from psychological crises required him to be hospitalized periodically. Through his journey to restoration, he became aware of the lack of attentiveness to the spiritual dimensions of psychological suffering and was motivated to bridge the divide between religion, psychology, and medicine. In a way reminiscent of James, Boisen was interested in the religious experience of psychological suffering. He reformed how we understand the preparation for and the practice of ministry. His emphasis upon the "living human document" has informed the use of psychology among all practical theologians.

Thomas Pugh is considered "the father of African American pastoral care." He grew up during legislated racial segregation in the United States. Like so many others who had to stand against dehumanizing racial ideologies, his early life experiences led him to emphasize the importance of personhood in his ministry and clinical practice. He discovered his passion for pastoral care by working with migrant workers. After several years of pastoral ministry, he earned a Ph.D. from Boston University. Later he was certified as a marriage and family therapist. Establishing the Department of Pastoral Care at the Interdenominational Theological Center, he was committed to the effective preparation of ministers and the advancement of pastoral care among African Americans. When the field began to take shape, the larger guild considered it an approach that contextualized theory for the black church and the black community. Today, however, the field stands on its own merits as a result of Pugh's foundational work.

Peggy Way is one of the first women pastoral theologians to make the guild of pastoral theology more sensitive to women and to other issues of justice. She was formed

in the crucible of the social gospel movement and social justice, earning a Master of Social Work before going to Chicago to earn a Bachelor of Divinity from the Federated Theological Faculty of the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1959. She later earned her Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. Consistent with the challenges of the 1960s and 1970s, she called passionately for justice for all by advocating liberation activities. Although she had a special passion for women, she has been committed to diversity and the inclusion of women, racial ethnics, gays and lesbians, and persons with disabilities. With commitments to the academy and the church, she has worked to integrate theology and psychology for the specified purpose of ministry practice.

## Psychology Theory and Practical Theology

As a social science, psychology probes the meaning of human existence by exploring epistemological questions of identity and finitude. Like the multiple schools of psychology, practical theology has many expressions and loci of concern. Each practical area emphasizes human social engagement within private and public spaces, for example, home/hospital, sanctuary, classroom, office, and community. As humanity searches for life's meaning, meaning is often constructed by and attributed to religion. Practical theologians, therefore, use psychological theories to help explore the ways culture and religions construct reality and govern human social intercourse. Regularly understood as an expression of both public theology and public ministry, practical theology seeks to engage and enhance social intercourse. At times, practical theology will reform culture through radical critique; and at other times it will work with culture through the affirmation of what is deemed good and produces justice.

To the extent that practical theologians are also cultural critics, it is imperative that they remain conscious of the cultural values and dynamics that influence observation and reflections. Just as Western society has affirmed psychology's psyche/somatic split, a split which holds the mind to be good and the body evil, later constructions of psychological theory tend toward splitting off from religious experience as soma, which in turn has elevated psychology and the mind above religion and the body. The science of the mind split from theology and regarded theology, like the human body, as inferior. Practical theology's use of psychological theory has often sought to end the dualistic psyche/somatic split and to redeem the body and theology from an inferior position by reframing theory to help mete out transformation and liberation in community relationships. Using psychological theory as a complementary resource instead of as a superior voice, practical theology assesses and interprets every human circumstance to explain and encourage community. In fact, it is the dialectic of theology and psychology within practical theological reflections that advocates transformation within the dynamics of culture.

Studying the early figures in the development of psychology suggests how some theories took on the qualities of religious dogma. While psychologists often distinguished their theories as value-free or objective, they often advocated them as the new way to "human salvation." Furthermore, since the Enlightenment, Americans have

been socialized to believe that science is a higher discourse than theology. This has created a challenge for practical theologians. Psychology as a science, regardless of whether it is perceived as "hard" or "soft," is attributed with greater authority than theology. Many practical theologians, therefore, are inclined to validate practical approaches by emphasizing psychology theory rather than employing psychology theory as a supporting resource for their reflections.

Consider the practical theological reflections of the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. as an example of a minister who weaves together Christian commitment, psychological theory, and religious expression. His theology is an interdisciplinary construction with its roots – deep, woven, and inseparable – in the gospel of Jesus the Christ, the African American Christian church, and the United States of America's founding principles of "freedom and justice for all." To the extent that theology is a reflective declaration of who God is and what God is doing in human relationships, Wright does not want to deny any part of his African American being as he reflects on the activities of God throughout human history. His reflections are *Africentric*, meaning he places African peoples, theology, psychology, philosophy, spiritual traditions, the history of African colonization, and the history of African American suffering at the center of his analyses. Na'im Akbar is a psychologist whose theories have been important to Wright's assessment of the malaise that plagues the African American community. His theology is *practical* in the disciplinary sense, that is, he focuses on homiletics, education, pastoral care, and evangelism. It is also *liberationist*, which means that he seeks through praxis-directed reflection to transform human suffering caused by social injustice in order that people may live with dignity and joy. Not unlike Boisen, who was inspired by the social gospel movement, Wright was formed in the crucible of the civil rights and human rights struggle for dignity and liberty. It is from within this cultural context that his practical theology has taken shape.

Because US history and culture have been heavily marked by the themes of religious freedom and of "one nation, under God," our culture is deeply embedded in religiosity. US psychology is rooted in the study of religious experience as well as in efforts to escape its influence. The impact of religiosity on psychology, I suggest, is a matter every practical theologian needs to keep in mind when engaging psychology theory. Even when the psychology theorist does not study religious phenomena, many of the theorists will have had a religious experience that has affected her/his construction of theory.

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