

Gossip, Scandals, Anecdotes (and even some Science) in the History of the Study of (Primarily Achievement) Motivation

This article examines the history of motivation psychology from the start of the 20th Century to about 1975, focusing on the study of achievement strivings. It is more “personal and up-close” than the typical historical writing. This also is a biased and selective history because only a subset of the important contributors (and some antagonists and associates), all deceased, is discussed. Eighteen psychologists are included, with four featured (David McClelland, John Atkinson, Fritz Heider, and Kurt Lewin) who represent different theoretical perspectives. Among the criteria used for the selection of psychologists represented in the history, which is reflected in the contents of this article, are: 1) there are interesting and little-known aspects to their lives, typically all-too-human, often involving mentors or students; 2) I had personal or indirect contact with the persons and possess some generally unshared knowledge about them; and/or 3) they had some contentious or antagonistic relationships with members of competing theoretical tribes. These “anti-heroes” also find a place in the article. In sum, as intimated in the title, this history includes more gossip, scandals, and anecdotes than typically is the case but these shed light on the growth of the science of motivation. Also, the connections or linkages between divergent approaches to motivation are highlighted.

The Trait Approach

In its most simple form, the trait approach to the study of behavior (here concentrating on achievement strivings) is that motivation is determined by some personality characteristic or trait. That is, causation lies within the person. For example, achievement strivings are believed to vary according to the strength of a personality trait

such as conscientiousness, dominance, energy level, and so on, with greater motivation due to having “more” of this characteristic. This approach requires, or has been associated with, two subordinate goals: first, a taxonomy of personality is sought to identify the basic traits; and second, there is an assessment device or measurement technique to ascertain the strengths of the various traits.

In the study of motivation, David McClelland is among the best representatives of this position. He believed that variables ranging from how hard an individual works at a task to the growth of a society are (in good part) determined by the level of achievement needs within the person or throughout society. He identified other fundamental needs as well such as affiliation and power, thus moving toward a taxonomy of personality. And he specified that a projective technique, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), is a valid assessment technique to determine need strength.

In this first section of the paper, I trace backward to the predecessors of and distal influences on McClelland, starting with William McDougall, who developed a list of instincts, and Karl Jung, who not only proposed a taxonomy of personality but also created projective assessment devices. McDougall and Jung influenced Henry Murray, whose contributions were proximally related to the work of McClelland in that Murray outlined a classification of needs that included the need for achievement and was the originator of the TAT as a measurement instrument. I first discuss these three psychologists prior to a more extended consideration of McClelland. I conclude this section of the paper by examining two psychologists who were associated with McClelland and received his aid: Timothy Leary (closely linked with the LSD movement

and the ideology of the 1960s) and Richard Alpert (later, Ram Das). In a later section of the article I include the influence of McClelland on John Atkinson as well.

This section of the paper also includes two “anti-hero” detours to behaviorism, another of the main approaches to motivation. The first diversion links William McDougall to John Watson, the father of behaviorism, while the second connects David McClelland to Clark Hull (via Carl Hovland), the most influential neo-behaviorist and founder of Drive theory. In sum, the organization of the psychologists discussed in this initial part of the article, with the direction of influence shown as well as the approximate dates of their main publications or impact, is as follows:

Publication dates	Trait Approach	Behaviorism & Drive Theory
1900-1930	Karl Jung William McDougall	John Watson
1930-1950	Henry Murray	Clark Hull
1950-1970	David McClelland	
1960-1975	Timothy Leary Richard Alpert	

William McDougall (1871-1938)

This history begins with the prolific and ubiquitous William McDougall: trained in medicine; self-labeled anthropologist; student of biology, genetics, intelligence and physiology; writer of textbooks in social and abnormal psychology; and motivation theorist. McDougall (1908) elucidated his motivation theory in his widely-known and well-received textbook, An Introduction to Social Psychology. He advocated an approach called *hormic (impulse) psychology*, contending that individuals are motivated

by a number of inherited instincts or “propensities.” These instincts do not give rise to fixed and inflexible actions; rather, they elicit purposive behaviors directed toward desired goals. McDougall further contended that each instinct not only determines the intensity and direction of behavior but also influences perception (attending to stimuli relevant to that instinct) and emotion. For example, the instinct of flight is aroused by a objects conveying danger and is linked with fear. As other numerous instinct theorists at that time, including Freud, McDougall could not decide on what, or how many, basic instincts exist. One of his lists included escape (linked with the emotion of fear), combat (accompanied by anger), repulsion (connected to disgust), and more. For the purposes of this article, what is most essential is that, according to McDougall, behavior is caused by dispositional qualities that are fixed in number and shared by individuals but vary in strength. This is similar to the position later adopted by Henry Murray, although for McDougall the instincts are genetically prescribed rather than learned dispositions.

McDougall counted among his friends Harry Houdini and William James, who shared interests (but not opinions) about the paranormal; and Karl Jung, his psychoanalyst after his interests were aroused when treating shell-shocked war veterans (recall he was trained in medicine). Yet he knew there were far more enemies in the public and among scientists, including John Watson, and that his scientific and personal reputation had disintegrated over time. The reasons for this decline were numerous. First, McDougall had a strong belief in paranormal phenomena, in spite of skepticism from others, including Houdini. Following his primary appointment at Oxford McDougall came to Harvard, where he pursued interests in mental telepathy and clairvoyance, along with James. About a decade later, in 1927, he became chairperson of

the Psychology Department at Duke and established a parapsychology laboratory that examined card-guessing and sought-out individuals who appeared to have special reception talents. This lab later became associated with Karl Rhine and remained at Duke until 1984.

A second cause of scientific skepticism was his belief that acquired characteristics could be inherited, an evolutionary position associated with Lamarck. He conducted animal investigations on this generally unaccepted stance.

But of most importance in his reputation decline was the perception that McDougall was a racist. Anthropological observations in New Guinea and Borneo, along with his beliefs in genetically-transmitted instincts and the inheritance of intelligence, led him to endorse racial stereotypes, particularly regarding African-Americans. In books and lectures he expressed concern about the decline of America because of the differential birth rates between racial groups and what he regarded as low fertility among the elite class. He advocated eugenics to stop biological degeneration.

The importance McDougall gave to genetics and inborn instincts, and his overlooking the roles played by learning and the environment in behavior, eventuated in a public debate with John Watson, regarded as the founder of behaviorism. While Watson's beliefs may have been more acceptable to the American public than those of McDougall, his personal behavior was not.

John B. Watson (1878-1958)

When Watson received the invitation to debate McDougall, which took place in 1924, he was no longer a professor at Johns Hopkins University. Instead, he was about to be promoted to Vice President of V. Walter Thompson advertising agency in New York, at a

very high salary. This transformation was not entirely of his choosing. Watson was married to Mary Ickes, whose brother was Secretary of the Interior under the direction of President Franklin Roosevelt. We know of Watson's investigation with Rosalie Raynor, conditioning "Little Albert" to fear a white rat by pairing its presence with a loud and unpleasant noise. This was his reference experiment to document conditioned fear and support his basic position that all behavior is learned and there are no inborn instincts (or need of motivation constructs). But Raynor was more than just a lab assistant -- she had been having an affair with Watson that was brought to light when his suspecting wife searched for and found love letters in his drawer. A divorce followed, amid support from the upper-class community in Baltimore (this was the 1920s!). Demands also were made that Watson be asked to resign from Johns Hopkins. He did that in 1920, married Ms. Raynor, and pursued a very successful business career, in part sustained by initiating data-driven decisions based on surveys and formulating clever slogans such as LSMFT (Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco).

But Watson continued his writing about behaviorism and therefore was a reasonable choice of the Psychological Club of Washington, D.C. to debate McDougall. The debate took place in the Convention Hall before nearly 1,000 attendees (at the time there were less than 500 members of APA) and was broadcast over the radio. Judges voted to determine the winner. The sides were clear – nature versus nurture; genetics versus learning; pessimism (fixed limitations) versus optimism (endless possibilities!). The two contestants were equally contrasting – the older, English, faithful academic versus the younger and very handsome American philanderer (who also had a

questionable past when an assistant at the University of Chicago). And they had no love and probably little respect of one another. McDougall stated "I have an advantage in that While Watson countered

The judges awarded McDougall the victory, although it is unlikely that the same would be said regarding the public! And Watson then exerted an enormous influence on the course of American psychology, even the study of motivation, which is discussed later.

Carl Jung (1875-1955)

Jung's analysis of McDougall resulted in little personal change ("I was too normal" wrote McDougall) or scientific impact. On the other hand, the therapy he administered to Henry Murray had profound personal impact and altered the course of motivation psychology. During therapy, Jung sought to determine the unconscious forces acting on the person that were causing imbalance or a failure to . One of his central quests was to ascertain the contents of the personal and collective unconscious. Among his early contributions to understand the personal unconscious was the development of an empirical approach that examined the latency as well as the content of word associations (ref). These data were believed to yield information about personality complexes, or . To study the collective unconscious, which was

Jung analyzed dreams and other symbols and noted their appearance across cultures and throughout history. Of particular importance was a series of dreams and drawings by Christiana Morgan, who subsequently became the life-long companion to Murray and persuaded Murray to be analyzed by Jung (but more of this later).

In the tradition of the extant approaches to personality, Jung developed a taxonomy (typology) of personality that focused on a distinction between introverts and extraverts (he coined those terms), and also examined the interaction of these characteristics with perception and affect. He also regarded personality characteristics as genetically given and was concerned with their measurement. .