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978-0-521-58358-9 - Rebels within the Ranks: Psychologists' Critique of Scientific Authority and Democratic Realities in New Deal America

Katherine Pandora

Excerpt

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Introduction

It is [the] combination of personal values without deep social underpinning which doubtless explains . . . the fact that we allow economic disorganization, which produces fourteen or fifteen million unemployed and their families to suffer; then, instead of letting them die off, we feel sorry for them to the extent of giving them "relief," maintaining them at a starvation level. It is a question whether such a combination of emphasis upon and violation of social values can be long sustained.

Lois Barclay Murphy (1937)

As . . . psychology goes beyond sheer common sense, and becomes dynamite to society, those dominant in society will try to protect themselves against the explosion. It seems to me that this is a sufficient answer to the ivory-tower remark that we should stick to science and let public practice alone. The answer is that public practice will not and cannot let psychology alone.

Gardner Murphy (1939)

To a large degree our division of labor is forced, not free; young people leaving our schools for a career of unemployment become victims of arrested emotional and intellectual development; our civil liberties fall short of our expressed ideal. Only the extension of democracy to those fields where democracy is not at present fully practised – to industry, educational administration, and to race relations for examples – can make possible the realization of infinitely varied purposes and the exercise of infinitely varied talents.

Gordon Allport (1940)¹

During the 1930s, the United States underwent one of its greatest periods of economic, social, and political crisis, as vocal groups of Americans engaged in intense debate over truths that no longer appeared to be self-evident. In an improvised chautauqua of national proportions, long-established patterns of authority were questioned, the nature of reality disputed, and the means and ends of the search for knowledge subjected to critique. Of the many questions reverberating through a diverse array of cultural arenas, none were

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so powerful as those placing the meaning of “democracy” under scrutiny. Given the scope of these cultural contests, it is not surprising that the moral, intellectual, and social relations of science became issues for public debate and professional soul-searching.²

Although the unsettling dynamics of life in 1930s America gave specific form and urgency to the questions put to the scientific community, such challenges existed prior to the great stock market crash of 1929, most notably in the radical theories of knowledge that preceding waves of thinkers had been developing since the closing decades of the nineteenth century.³ Many of these theorists, impressed as they were by scientific achievements, were nevertheless disturbed by triumphalist pronouncements that seemed to be closing off debate concerning the nature of science. Willing to experiment with the idea of science itself, such critics rebelled against restrictive definitions of what properly constituted the boundaries of scientific life. This view was aptly expressed in 1925 by philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, when he asked in *Science and the Modern World*: “Is it not possible that the standardised concepts of science are only valid within narrow limitations, perhaps too narrow for science itself?”⁴

The arguments of these intellectual provocateurs and the depression era’s debates over democratic ideals converged in the work of a cohort of social and personality psychologists who gained increasing visibility as the decade unfolded. Among those figuring prominently in this dissent from the status quo are the three psychologists – Gordon Allport (1897–1967), Gardner Murphy (1895–1979), and Lois Barclay Murphy (1902–) – whose work, circumstances, and communities of affinity I discuss in the following chapters.⁵ The cultural critique articulated by Allport and the Murphys during the 1930s placed them at a tangent to the intellectual mainstream of scientific and political life, but not outside of it: they were rebels *within* the ranks of academic science.⁶ They dissented from orthodox views that endorsed the status quo, but they gave voice to that dissent as fully credentialed members of the guild.

As the 1930s progressed, each of these psychologists acquired significant authority, as manifested in various ways. Allport, for example, served as editor of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* beginning in 1937, was awarded a starred entry in the sixth edition of *American Men of Science* in 1938, and was elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA) the following year. Gardner Murphy was elected to both the APA council of directors and the presidency of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) in 1937; in 1939 he missed being elected APA president by eleven votes. He would receive this honor in 1944, the same year he would receive his “star” in the seventh edition of *American Men of Science*.⁷ Murphy’s influence was also furthered by his editorship of a mono-

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graph series for Harper's. In contrast, Lois Barclay Murphy chose, for the most part, to avoid organizational entanglements and committee obligations – she, never, for example, joined the APA. Murphy did, however, have the enthusiastic support of influential foundation officials such as Lawrence K. Frank during his tenure with both the Rockefeller and the Macy foundations, receiving substantial financial assistance to conduct her dissertation research and to establish a nursery school laboratory at Sarah Lawrence in 1937.⁸ Such support enabled her and her collaborator, psychologist Eugene Lerner, to assemble a multifaceted consulting team to launch their research program.⁹ If, by the decade's end, the work of these three psychologists was still considered to be at odds with ascendent conventions, it could hardly be characterized as marginal, and their dissent had, in fact, gained considerable momentum.

Social activists as well as social scientists, Allport and the Murphys drew on a densely interrelated set of resources in constructing their scientific practices and in articulating their cultural critique. In assaying the fields of social and personality psychology, these three individuals sought footholds from which they could simultaneously argue for reconstructing American society and American science: indeed, they believed that unless both efforts advanced together, neither would be successful.

Unlike the majority of their colleagues, Allport and the Murphys rejected the image of the laboratory as an ivory tower, contested the canons of objectivity that characterized current research practice, and argued against reducing the natural and the social worlds to the lowest possible terms. They realized that, in giving priority to questions about the “individual” and the “social” in their psychological research, they were manipulating cultural categories laden with political implications. Choosing to work at the intellectual intersection of the social and the personal in 1930s America was to plunge oneself immediately into the midst of a cacophonous crowd of communities struggling to come to grips with the meaning of “America,” as customary configurations of values were questioned in the wake of the economic collapse.¹⁰

That historical, economic, and political questions played themselves out within personal and social worlds suggested to Allport and the Murphys that psychological research could be used to critique American culture and thus to help create a more democratic polity. That such a possibility existed did not change their judgment that psychology as then currently constituted displayed serious flaws as an analytical discipline. In a 1937 letter, for example, Allport characterized psychology as “a crude and arrogant discipline” and counted among “the worst of its historic blunders” such defects as its “excessive empiricism, grotesque nativism, traffic in boggled ethics, superficiality, and undue abstractness.”¹¹ Gardner Murphy, for his part, was disturbed that

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“17th-century naive mechanism” still held sway in so many of the sciences, and that psychology had “been content to model itself upon physics and biology and instead of challenging their tenets has felt that its own scientific status depended in large part upon acceptance of the standard world view.”¹² Lois Barclay Murphy likewise complained that “research on children was largely dominated by criteria of objectivity whose influence it was not easy to transcend.”¹³ She suggested that “experimental human psychology” might do well to ponder the fact that “long ago a seer who was concerned with control of behavior remarked that the Sabbath was made for Man, not Man for the Sabbath.”¹⁴

Despite finding themselves at odds with disciplinary dogma during this period, Allport and the Murphys judged that they could successfully challenge the status quo by furthering a scientific philosophy that was unafraid, in the words of William James, of lying “flat on its belly in the middle of experience.”¹⁵ The “narrow limitations” of the “standardised concepts of science” – to appropriate Whitehead’s terms – became especially apparent in the attempt to study personal and social experience. To overcome these limitations, one could either advocate abridging the experiential world so as to fit scientific conventions or urge that scientific practice be recast in an attempt to capture larger and more complex dimensions of experience. Allport and the Murphys pressed the latter view, arguing that there was greater need to refigure scientific reality than to uphold scientific custom.

In discussing the work of these psychologists I pursue two ends. First, I try to elucidate the nature of the dissent advanced by Allport and the Murphys, by examining how they used various intellectual legacies, how they worked and argued, and what perspectives they developed. Here, I also explore the relationships that existed between their work within social and personality psychology and the cultural politics of this pivotal period. Second, I use this episode of psychological discontent to point to the existence within the scientific enterprise of robust critiques of the rules of the game, and to demonstrate the need for historians of modern science to examine the contours of dissent, as well as the structures and products of assent. In the conclusion, I address this issue further, suggesting why a critique that emerged from within *social* science possesses relevance for reflecting on the nature of the sciences in general.

The “Intellectual Commons” of 1930s America

Although it is true that psychology was Allport’s and the Murphys’ primary discipline, the nature of their thinking and the significance of their ventures cannot be understood without some idea of the extent to which their activi-

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ties repeatedly traversed an “intellectual commons” made possible by the search for new structures of meaning in the 1930s. One of the reasons that the work of these three scientists is of historical interest is precisely because they chose to place themselves directly within this crowded intellectual cross-roads, actively entering into the cultural issues at play during this period.

Within the frame of this trio’s discourse, representations of science and representations of America were intimately interwoven, mediated by a core set of terms: the “individual” and the “social.”¹⁶ The sense in which they used these terms is similar to that given in a statement of John Dewey and John Childs, from a 1933 essay: “*Social* cannot be opposed in fact or in idea to *individual*. Society is individuals-in-their-relations. An individual apart from social relations is a myth – or a monstrosity.”¹⁷ Attempts to conceptualize the mutuality of the “individual” and the “social” were expressed in numerous ways during this period: for example, Lois Barclay Murphy spoke of “the total personality in its cultural setting” and of “the broader problem of personality development as a whole and the social context in which it appears”; Allport referred to “the social framework within which personality develops” and also used the expression “personality and culture,” a shorthand tag that gained wide currency.¹⁸ When referring in a general way to these perspectives, I will use the term “the-individual-in-social-context,” a standardization of these various locutions.

As an overarching idea, there could scarcely be anything more prosaic than the concept denoted by the term “the-individual-in-social-context,” and yet, as elaborated by activist psychologists such as these three, this framework embraced a variety of destabilizing assumptions. In the hands of Allport and the Murphys, the study of the “individual” became a consideration of “individuality,” a concept at odds with the widespread belief that questions of uniqueness and singularity belonged to the arts, not to the sciences. Alternatively, attention to “contextuality” sat uneasily beside methodological prescriptions to abstract the objects of scientific scrutiny from the fields in which they were embedded in the quest for universal laws; in turn, such revisionist thinking brought into question laboratory practices assumed to be unproblematic. And, perhaps most disquieting of all, it required only a small leap of logic to move from the more general sense of “the-individual-in-social-context” to a more sharply defined category, such as that of “the-*scientific*-individual-in-social-context,” and to challenge the presumption that scientific investigation existed apart from the larger polity. For the “pure” science contingent whom they were debating, the scientific dubiety of such constructs is indicated by the elaborate statistical and experimental lengths to which they went to “eliminate” them.¹⁹

In striving to work through the ramifications of the individual and the social from their positions within personality and social psychology, Allport

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and the Murphys participated in, and helped to further, arguments that cut across a number of disciplinary spheres of discourse, including anthropology, biology, history, philosophy, progressive education, religion, sociology, and the arts. One such argument, voiced by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* (1934), was that, “at different points in the interpretation of culture forms, both history and psychology are necessary; one cannot make the one do without the service of the other.”²⁰ Similarly, the 1940 manifesto, *The Cultural Approach to History*, opened with a section on “techniques of cultural analysis” comprised of chapters by an anthropologist, a social psychologist, and a psychoanalyst. Historian Caroline Ware, editor of the volume, observed that the anthropological and the psychological “meet in the concept of ‘personality,’ the ‘individual-in-society,’” and she maintained that historians had much to learn from the ongoing efforts of social scientists to deploy this framework.²¹ In a like manner, Gardner Murphy called upon his psychological colleagues “to see the individual clearly in his full cultural context” by integrating anthropological and historical materials into their psychological analyses.²²

The forging of such interdisciplinary sensibilities was a product of both communal discourse and personal encounters. As a young married couple, Columbia instructor Gardner Murphy and Sarah Lawrence faculty member Lois Barclay Murphy were friends with anthropologist Margaret Mead and discussed her fieldwork experiences with her; they also sat in on one of Benedict’s anthropology courses, on “primitive religions.”²³ Allport had close ties to colleagues in Harvard’s sociology department, chief among them Pitirim Sorokin, who published a four-volume study, *Social Dynamics and Culture*, in the latter 1930s. Allport’s course in social psychology was open to students in the sociology department and included such readings as Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*, Gregory Bateson’s *Naven*, Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*, and Thurman Arnold’s *Symbols of Government*.²⁴ Sociologists were also part of the Murphys’ New York intellectual circle, with Robert and Helen Lynd, authors of the sociological community studies *Middletown* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition* (1935), being especially close friends. It was Robert Lynd, in fact, who arranged for Gardner Murphy to attend an interdisciplinary conference organized by anthropologist Edward Sapir for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) on the theme of “personality and culture” in 1930, which is where Murphy first met Allport.²⁵ As members of an SSRC subcommittee, Allport, along with Murphy and Mark May, worked with an interdisciplinary group of scholars to prepare an SSRC bulletin entitled *Memorandum on Competition and Cooperation*.²⁶ In the published report, Allport, Murphy, and May stated that the area being designated “for the want of a better name, ‘Personality and Culture,’ seems to represent one more attempt to find a field of inquiry that will enlist the active interest and

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joint support of psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, and sociologists.”²⁷

Their literary output during the 1930s was crowned by the Murphys' *Experimental Social Psychology*, which appeared both in 1931 and in a revised edition in 1937, and by Allport's 1937 volume, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*.²⁸ Both projects were ambitious attempts at agenda-setting, as the authors made clear. Allport remarked, in regard to the psychology of personality, that he had answered “an insistent demand for a guide book that will *define* the new field of study – one that will articulate its objectives, formulate its standards, and test the progress made thus far.” The Murphys stated, in regard to experimental social psychology, that they were responding to the “need for a volume suggesting what it is and what it may hope to become.”²⁹ These massive tomes (*Personality* had 588 pages, *Experimental Social Psychology* 709, the revised edition 1,121) broadcast their authors' intention to place themselves at the forefront of debates in the still-developing fields of personality and social psychology.

That Allport made his presence felt most explicitly in the realm of personality psychology and the Murphys in social psychology should not be construed, however, as indicating that any of these three restricted themselves to one area of emphasis; quite the contrary. Allport contributed a review chapter entitled “Attitudes” to the 1935 *Handbook of Social Psychology*, while Gardner Murphy produced the survey *Approaches to Personality: Some Contemporary Conceptions Used in Psychology and Psychiatry* five years before Allport's interpretive treatise on the subject.³⁰ Their overarching goal was to find ways to juxtapose the individual and the social, and in some of their works this commitment is evident on the title page: Lois Barclay Murphy's 1937 study, *Social Behavior and Child Personality: An Exploratory Study of Some Roots of Sympathy*, is one expression of this concern, as are such analytic turns as Allport's essay “Dewey's Individual and Social Psychology” and Gardner Murphy's article “Personality and Social Adjustments” (or, indeed, the remarks under the section “The Individual in Relation to His Culture” in the revised *Experimental Social Psychology*).³¹

Nor were these psychologists' efforts restricted to professional audiences during this period. Allport sought a wider public with *The Psychology of Radio*, a work indicting corporate control of the “ether.”³² Gardner Murphy produced *Public Opinion and the Individual*, an inquiry into attitudes on social issues. He also collaborated with author Paul Grabbe on a book for a broad audience, entitled *We Call It Human Nature*.³³ Allport and the Murphys also brought their thinking on various psychological topics before the public in such popular magazines as *Understanding the Child* and *The Family* (Allport), *Harper's Magazine* and *American Magazine* (Gardner Murphy), and *Good Housekeeping* and *Parents' Magazine* (Lois Barclay Murphy).³⁴

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The scope, form, and content of the work of Allport and the Murphys have received little notice in histories of the social sciences. To some extent, research such as theirs has been overlooked because historians interested in the 1920s and 1930s have been focusing on the rise and elaboration of behaviorist ideologies of science. The “behaviorist standpoint” in psychology was most forcefully articulated by John Watson in his manifesto of 1913; at heart, as Stephen Toulmin and David Leary observe, Watson sought “to make psychology as close to experimental physics as he knew how.”³⁵ Watson’s “classical” behaviorism soon yielded to the efforts of revisionists, with the result that a number of neobehaviorist and neopositivist stances contributed to the establishment ethos of the 1930s.³⁶ The reigning orthodoxy on the question of studying the individual-in-social-context, as expressed by John Dashiell in his 1928 text, *Fundamentals of Objective Psychology*, struck a decidedly chastening tone. Proper scientific procedure – that of “natural science” – Dashiell affirmed, did not allow the observation of “concrete persons as wholes in complex social situations.”³⁷

Dashiell’s insistence that the legitimacy of psychological science lay in its adherence to principles derived from natural science represents one of the key tenets of what can be loosely characterized as the neobehaviorist community. This trope was stirringly rendered in the 1936 APA presidential address of Yale psychologist Clark Hull, a neobehaviorist standard-bearer. Hull exhorted his audience to adopt “strictly orthodox scientific methodology,” which he illustrated with allusions to the work of Galileo. He then bracingly reminded his audience that Galileo had practiced “this methodology at the imminent risk of imprisonment, torture, and death,” while his twentieth-century colleagues had only to wrench themselves free from “the thrall of the Middle Ages” by throwing off “the shackles of a lifeless tradition.”³⁸ Jill G. Morawski, in her perceptive analysis of Hull and his associates at Yale’s Institute of Human Relations, argues that Hull envisioned scientific research as proceeding “most economically if structured like a psychic machine, an automatic mechanism free from subjectivity.” Not surprisingly, Hull inculcated scientific orthodoxy in seminar participants by requiring them to study Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*.³⁹

Such neobehaviorist exhortations existed alongside psychology’s increasing emphasis on laboratory experimentation, mental testing, and statistical procedures.⁴⁰ These methodological imperatives – aptly described by Toulmin and Leary as the foundation of a “cult of empiricism” – were proposed as prerequisites for the establishment of rigor and objectivity within psychological science.⁴¹ Since the mid-1970s, these interwar trends have been increasingly scrutinized by historians of psychology from a number of vantage

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points. Such work has detailed the pervasive reach of neobehaviorist initiatives and has illuminated the diverse array of commitments these initiatives advanced.⁴²

My use of neobehaviorism as an umbrella term for the kinds of disciplinary moves advocated by psychologists such as Dashiell and Hull inevitably homogenizes a diverse sphere of discourse that displayed idiosyncrasies at every level, from foundational assumptions and methodological prescriptions to guiding metaphors and final conclusions. Psychologists who found themselves at odds with the general trend of pledging allegiance to the physical sciences, such as Allport and the Murphys, understood that scientists such as Karl Lashley, Clark Hull, B. F. Skinner, and Edward Tolman did not hew to a neatly categorized set of principles that rendered their work interchangeable.⁴³ Nevertheless, such neobehaviorist efforts often shared a constellation of values intended to channel academic research into increasingly restrictive paths, by assigning priority to what were declared to be rules derived from physical science in framing research questions. Such strictures (whether characterized by participants as objectivist, positivist, logically empiricist, physicalist or behaviorist) frequently sanctioned reducing human phenomena to animal analogues, physiological substratum, statistical distillates, or mechanistic systematics.⁴⁴

In 1931 Robert S. Woodworth, one of psychology's elder statesmen, remarked that "behaviorism is a spirit or attitude rather than any fixed theory."⁴⁵ My use of neobehaviorism as a collective term is meant to evoke this sense of common spirit as well as to refer to a set of academic ventures, for figures like Allport and the Murphys objected not only to aspects of the methods and theories offered by "austere" empiricists but also to the restrictionist tone in which the debate was being waged. If a certain degree of latitude was allowed within the neobehaviorist circle – as in, say, Tolman's nonconventional insistence on the purposive and cognitive nature of behavior – those who worked outside of it were not strangers to feeling, in Allport's words, "the scorching displeasure of behaviorists and objectivists" turned upon them.⁴⁶ When Allport publicly attacked what he saw as a mood of coercion and intolerance being promoted within psychology, he was scored by colleague E. G. Boring for presumably displaying a parallel dogmatism in objecting to the move to establish neobehaviorist principles as normative. Allport replied, "In so far as current trends displease me, I reserve my right to fight them, even though I am in the minority. But I think I can fundamentally tolerate the views of those I am fighting." Stating that he realized "the danger of saying that the intolerance lies on the other side," he nevertheless asked "is it not in fact likely to lie on the side of the majority (meaning by majority the distinguished and articulate members of the profession)?"⁴⁷

Although Gardner Murphy avoided the head-on confrontation Allport

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mounted, he also pointed to aspects of behaviorism that gave him pause. In offering a definition of behaviorism in his 1929 text, *An Historical Introduction to Modern Psychology*, Gardner Murphy observed, "Behaviourism has become in many quarters simply a name for mechanistic psychology, or has been reduced to a mere *emphasis* upon objective, as opposed to subjective, data." In Murphy's view, the essence of behaviorism was its promise that psychology would one day achieve the objectivity held to be characteristic of physical science, with all psychological data being "verified in the manner of the physical experiment."⁴⁸ Yet in his concluding remarks Murphy found reason to counsel caution regarding the fruitfulness of experimentation. Although he allowed that experimental methods had gained "in variety and in reliability," he nonetheless claimed that they had proven "hopelessly unable to keep pace with the imperative demand for more factual material upon the emotional and volitional life, the nature of suggestibility and imitation, the relative importance of heredity and environment in the causation of individual differences, the manner in which social likes and dislikes, ambitions and ideals, are acquired, and a host of equally pressing questions." Murphy recommended an emphasis upon developmental perspectives as a remedy for this deficiency in experimental efficacy.⁴⁹ Indeed, he asserted that one hundred years into the future, "when the laws of physiology and of quantitative psychology have merged," that psychology's major methodological challenge would have yet to be conquered: the struggle "to devise reliable methods for the direct study of experience, methods which we cannot at present even dimly outline."⁵⁰

In his surveys of the psychological discipline at the end of the 1930s, Allport tracked the growing influence of experimentation based on "the self-discipline of mathematics and of the natural sciences." The current popularity of animal research, Allport argued, was due to "its delightful suitability for the exercise of objective and approved methods. By studying rats, not men, we gain status as scientists, for like the natural sciences we can, in this line of investigation, employ precision techniques and operational modes of communication."⁵¹ Allport remained unconvinced of the relevance of such ideals, maintaining that "most of the vital and practical questions of psychology are difficult to approach with the sterilized forceps of strict physical science."⁵² In his APA presidential address, Allport underscored this point to the assembled audience by detailing his bemusement when a close colleague challenged him to identify a single psychological question that could not be solved by using rats as subjects.⁵³ Somewhat taken aback, Allport managed to murmur something about the psychology of reading disabilities. Upon reflection, there came flooding to mind "the aesthetic, humourous, religious and cultural behavior of men. I thought of how men build clavichords and cathedrals, how they write books, and how they laugh uproariously at