

A Missed Opportunity for Psychology: The Story of Solomon Carter Fuller

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The 1909 Clark University Conference.
Solomon Carter Fuller is on the extreme right, last row (or, the third person back). In the front row are E.B. Titchener (second from left), William James (third), G. Stanley Hall (sixth), Sigmund Freud (seventh), and Carl Jung (eighth).¹

Psychology generally acknowledges Francis Cecil Sumner as the first African American psychologist. Sumner completed his PhD at Clark University in 1920 under G. Stanley Hall (Guthrie, 2004).

A decade earlier, Hall had sponsored a weeklong conference at Clark, remembered now as the occasion of Freud's only visit to America. Psychologists today may be familiar with the photograph of the distinguished American and foreign psychologists and psychoanalysts in attendance (see photo to the right). Hall is pictured in the center of the front row, with Freud and Jung standing to his left, and William James and Edward Titchener over on the right. However, in the back row is a man whose name and face is unfamiliar to psychologists, but maybe someone we should have known better.

Solomon Carter Fuller is the only African American in the photo. By 1909 he was already an established professional, and invited to the Clark conference. But what was his connection to psychology?

Fuller was an African American, but in a most accurate sense of this term. He was from Liberia, the grandson of freed American slaves who had returned to Africa. Solomon Fuller came to North Carolina to attend Livingstone College, and afterwards graduated from medical school at Boston University. In 1909 Fuller was working as a neuropathologist at Westborough (or Westboro) State Hospital in Massachusetts.

Though not a psychologist, Solomon Fuller's work and travels intersected often with psychology. Fuller was a friend of G. Stanley Hall's. He was also Hall's personal physician (Kaplan, 2005), and maybe even his analyst (Ross, 1978). Fuller studied brain pathology in dementia and the psychoses, and gave a presentation to the Clark University biology department in that same summer prior to the psychology meetings.

Fuller had gone to Europe in 1904 for a year of study to improve his laboratory and diagnostic skills. There he met Emil Kraepelin, a Wundt PhD and who later became a renowned psychiatrist. Fuller then sought a position working in Alois Alzheimer's lab. From the waiting room during an interview session, Fuller could hear Alzheimer turning away the other applicants one after another ("not ripe enough!" was

Sharpley's translation, 1978, p. 190). However, Fuller was selected for the lab skills he already possessed which would contribute to Alzheimer's work. Fuller's work in Alzheimer's lab was as a neuropathologist — doing anatomical and histological preparations, followed by microscopic examination of the resulting brain samples.

When Fuller returned to Westborough he brought an interest in neuropathology and dementia, and published a paper on his Westborough lab work on brains of patients who had died from paralytic dementia (probably syphilis), microcephaly, and chronic alcoholism. He continued his work on the newly labeled Alzheimer's disease (the attribution given by Krapelin), adding new samples. The description of Alzheimer's disease at that time was based on only a few case samples. Fuller (1912) translated Alzheimer's original case in English for the first time, that of a 51-year-old woman, and reviewed other known cases, including one Fuller himself had discovered (said to be only the ninth case, Kaplan & Henderson, 2000). These early descriptions mention the plaques, "basket-like" appearance of ganglion cells, and alterations of the neurofibrils, which are the plaques and tangles we cite today as characteristic of Alzheimer's.

Fuller also noted differences among the individual cases, some anatomical and some in symptoms (e.g., whether psychosis was present in addition to dementia). And, he noted the similarity of the presenile brains abnormalities to older demented brains.

Solomon Fuller left Westborough hospital in 1919 and moved to Boston to teach full time at Boston University's medical school. According to his biographer, Fuller corresponded with Freud, took courses with William James, and was influenced by the psychiatrist Adolf Meyer (Kaplan, 2005). Fuller retired from the medical school in 1933, although he continued his practice as a neurologist, psychiatrist and physician. He died in 1953.

At the time, Fuller's interests did not coincide with those of academic psychology, but they overlapped with areas we were moving into. Fuller's research was on the brain basis for dementia and mental disorders. He was interested in psychoanalysis, although more as a therapeutic tool than as a theoretical system. Psychology students from Clark and Harvard were interning (of sorts) at Worcester State Hospital, near Westborough, which even had a psychology department. There was Solomon Fuller, living and working in proximity to America's premier psychologists and psychology departments, and yet he never formally entered our history. I cannot say whether this was due to a lapse on the part of his contemporaries in psychology, or a lapse in our historical record. Fuller's work was aligned with the then developing discipline of psychiatry; psychology's studies of the brain were only just beginning; and psychoanalysis was still a peripheral force in academic psychology.

Not that Fuller was treated well by the medical profession. He received lesser titles and lower salaries than white medical professors. Yet, psychiatry has acknowledged Fuller as the first African-American psychiatrist, and the American Psychiatric Association annually gives a Solomon Carter Fuller Award.

Psychologists have always appropriated innovators from other disciplines whose contributions melded with ours. Ivan Pavlov, Roger Sperry, Eric Kandel, Albert Ellis, sometimes even Freud, to name a few. Maybe its time to renew our acquaintance with one more, Solomon Fuller. ?

References

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¹ *Beginning with first row, left to right:* Franz Boas, E.B. Titchener, William James, William Stern, Leo Burgerstein, G. Stanley Hall, Sigmund Freud, Carl G. Jung, Adolf Meyer, H.S. Jennings. *Second row:* C.E. Seashore, Joseph Jastrow, J. McK. Cattell, E.F. Buchner, E. Katzenellenbogen, Ernest Jones, A.A. Brill, Wm. H. Burnham, A.F. Chamberlain. *Third row:* Albert Schinz, J.A. Magni, B.T. Baldwin, F. Lyman Wells, G.M. Forbes, E.A. Kirkpatrick, Sandor Ferenczi, E.C. Sanford, J.P. Porter, Sakyo Kanda, Hikoso Kaksie. *Fourth row:* G.E. Dawson, S.P. Hayes, E.B. Holt, C.S. Berry, G.M. Whipple, Frank Drew, J.W. A. Young, L.N. Wilson, K.J. Karlson, H.H. Goddard, H.I. Klopp, S.C. Fuller.