

The History of Women in Psychology

February 27, 2011

Ann Johnson

The “History of Women in Psychology” symposium at the APS 21st Annual Convention provided a glimpse into the history and challenges women psychologists have faced, through the eyes of both historical researchers and two pioneering women who lived that history.

Ann Johnson of the University of St. Thomas described the “classic history” of women in psychology: “Women psychologists’ contributions and lives were excluded or minimized in traditional accounts of the field for many, many years, but that began to change, finally, after the infusion of feminist critique and analysis into psychology in the 1960s and 1970s, when their contributions and their lives were resurrected and historians started to document the life stories of these women and to preserve their voices.” In recent years, the “first generation” of female psychologists have started to receive more recognition, Johnson said, but it is challenging to find information regarding the “second generation” of female researchers (those receiving PhDs between 1906 and 1945). Johnson also observed that historians tend to focus on psychologists who worked as academics and not so much on those working in applied psychology and, as a result, we know very little about women who were applied psychologists in the first and middle part of the 20th century. However, there are a few, including Mildred Mitchell (a clinical psychologist who worked in military settings) and Georgene Seward (an experimental psychologist who challenged traditional gender roles with empirical research in her book *Sex and the Social Order*). Johnson concluded that we should rethink our criteria for role model status among women in psychology and consider new role model categories such as career flexibility, work-family balance, and persistence.

Alexandra Rutherford of York University began her talk on “Feminism and Psychology,” by noting that “the explicitly feminist storylines of psychology’s past” have not been explored as much as other parts of psychological history. During her presentation, Rutherford emphasized that feminism has taken different forms, depending on the time period. Her talk was organized according to these “waves” of feminism in order to keep the focus on feminism as political movement and the ways in which that political movement “influenced some women who were making their way as psychologists during those periods.” First wave feminism had an impact on psychology through the individual efforts of select women, as they were “trying to do better science to combat the socially sanctioned beliefs about women that were taken as fact.” Feminism went underground during the period that Rutherford referred to as “between the waves”—women continued challenging sexist practices, but with a less overt and prominent gender-based agenda. Feminist psychology emerged as an institutionally recognized field during the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the Association for Women in Psychology was formed in 1969. This period saw successful challenges to institutionalized sexism as well as challenges to male-centric psychological theories. Rutherford concluded with a description of post-second wave feminism, when critical feminist psychology emerged, and noted that feminist empiricism continues today, in the form of gender differences research.

Eleanor Maccoby

APS Secretary, Anne Treisman, Princeton University, and Eleanor Maccoby, an APS Fellow and Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Stanford University, provided fascinating overviews, peppered with a number of colorful anecdotes, of how their careers have evolved. Treisman admitted that she was pretty lucky and “probably not very typical of my generation.” During her career, she experienced minor examples of discrimination, which she managed to brush off. For example, early in her career, she was lecturing to a group of doctors. During the question and answer session, she was asked, “What’s a nice girl like you doing in psychology?” Treisman observed that timing had a lot to do with how her career developed. When she was starting out, the expectations were very different compared to today — there were not as many journals to read, less job competition, and fewer publications expected. Also, the “two-body problem” (trying to find a job in the same place as your spouse) is more of an issue today than when she was beginning her career. She joked that for this reason, she always advised her daughters that a “portable spouse is a huge asset.” She concluded that one of the reasons for her success was the expectations she had for herself — she had always expected to be treated equally.

Maccoby described how she was often an unwitting catalyst for social change. One particular incident occurred when she was working at the Federal Reserve Building in Washington, DC. She had set a lunch meeting with a researcher who had wanted a consultation from her. The researcher was African-American and Maccoby had not been aware that her building’s lunchroom was segregated. Following their lunch, “there was hell to pay,” including her secretary refusing to work for her anymore. As a result, Maccoby met with one of the Directors, and upon telling him what happened, he announced that the public areas in the building would no longer be segregated. The audience burst into a huge round of applause as Maccoby concluded, “So I involuntarily desegregated the Federal Reserve Building cafeteria!” Maccoby also talked about her time teaching at Harvard and Stanford. After she arrived at Stanford, a group of students stole records of faculty salaries and divulged how much the professors earned during the graduation ceremony. When they got to Maccoby, they announced, “Oh, and here comes the lowest paid full professor in the university.” Maccoby had no idea that was the case and she ended up getting a “nice raise” a few weeks after.

Like Treisman, Maccoby overall did not feel discriminated against; her focus was to produce excellent research. She “did not want to be a role model, just because I’m a woman.” Like any good researcher, she wants the focus to be on the science.