

Major Historical Figures in Educational Psychology

Edward L. Thorndike (1874-1949) is sometimes called the “father of educational psychology.” He spent nearly all of his career at Teachers College, Columbia University. His appointment was in psychology, however, rather than education and this enabled him to conduct research. Thorndike believed that instruction should pursue specified, socially useful goals. In teacher training, he emphasize attention, memory, habit, mental training, and—most important—experimental approaches to the study of learning and instruction. He also is widely credited with publishing the first textbook on educational psychology (in 1903). By the beginning of the First World War, Thorndike’s accumulated work had succeeded in firmly establishing the field of educational psychology as a distinct discipline within psychology.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher and educator whose writings and teachings have had profound influences on education in the United States. His influence continues to this day. Dewey's philosophy of education, *instrumentalism* (also called pragmatism), focused on learning-by-doing rather than rote learning and dogmatic instruction, the current practice of his time. Dewey also founded and directed a laboratory school at the University of Chicago, where he was afforded an opportunity to directly apply his developing ideas on pedagogical method. This experience provided the material for his first major work on education, The School and Society (1899). His interest in educational theory continued during his later work at Teachers College at Columbia. This led to the publication of How We Think (1910; revised ed. 1933), an application of his theory of knowledge to education, and Democracy and Education (1916) perhaps his most important work in the field.

G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924) is a name not only known in the field of psychology, but also in education. He can easily be called the founder of organized psychology as a science and profession, the father of the child study movement, and was a national leader of educational reform. Hall was granted his Ph.D. in psychology under William James--the first Ph.D. in psychology in America. He began as a professor of psychology at Johns Hopkins University in 1882. When Clark University opened in 1889, Hall was named president, and remained there until his death in 1924. Hall founded the first American psychological journal in 1887, along with many to follow in later years. Hall was more of a “popularizer” of psychology than a scientist. He is, however, important for his work showing the significance of adolescence as a turning point in psychological growth, and is still widely cited (though little read) today.

William James (1842-1910) took a degree in medicine from Harvard, but was interested in philosophy. He later began teaching psychology at Harvard University, delivering perhaps the first lectures in the newly-established discipline. He published Principles of Psychology in 1890 and the book was widely read, helping to determine the direction of American psychology. James viewed the human mind as an active organism rather than a passive adapter to its environment. His psychology was functional and pragmatic. Donald Charles (1987) notes that James’ influence on educational psychology

was based on his lectures for teachers and teacher trainees, and his advice tended to be practical and concrete—perhaps, in part, because he did not hold a positive view of the intellectual capacities of the teachers of his era. His lectures were later published in a book which is still widely read in teacher training courses today—Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals (James, 1899).

Other prominent educational psychologists in the early years of the field included:

James McKeen Cattell (1860-1944)

James R. Angell (1869-1949)

Robert S. Woodworth (1869-1962).

Charles Judd (1873-1946)

Edmund B. Huey (1870-1913).

For more information on the history of educational psychology, see:

Charles, D.C. (1987). The emergence of educational psychology. In J.A. Glover & R.R. Ronning (Eds.), Historical foundations of educational psychology (pp. 3-15). New York: Plenum.

Hilgard, E.R. (1996). History of educational psychology. In D.C. Berliner & R.C. Calfee (Eds.), Handbook of educational psychology (pp. 990-1004). New York: Macmillan.