The Forward March of Psychological Science and Practice

A Review of

Portraits of Pioneers in Psychology: Volume VI
by Donald A. Dewsbury, Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., and Michael Wertheimer (Eds.)
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Reviewed by

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The English word pioneer has a curious etymology. Its ultimate origin is the Latin word for “foot”—the same source as that for words like pedal, pedestrian, millipede, expedite, impede, podiatry, podium, octopus, and peon. The most proximate source is the Old French word peonier, for “foot soldier,” which in its turn was adapted from the Late Latin word for someone who has “broad feet.” In line with this usage is the word’s military application to the soldiers who performed the basic demolition and construction work needed to facilitate troop progress in the field. Thus, the original meaning of pioneer was, if you will pardon the pun, rather pedestrian. Certainly, it is a far cry from its current exalted status as someone who ventures into new territory or who opens up new areas of creativity or leadership—the trailblazers, groundbreakers, and innovators of history. Yet the diverse meanings have one claim in common: Pioneers are all engaged in advancing from one point to another, where that advancement poses some special challenges with respect to the uncertain, the unknown, or the unprecedented.

It is in that broad sense that we can group all of the 17 psychologists honored with portraits in Portraits of Pioneers in Psychology: Volume VI. Although some of these individuals have become universally known for their breakthrough contributions to psychological science or practice, others occupy a somewhat less prominent place in the history of the discipline. Yet every single one counts as a pioneer insofar as he or she moved psychology closer to where it is today. Our current field would be noticeably less advanced without their arduous efforts. To appreciate the nature of these pioneering contributions, I need first to give an overview of the book’s intent and contents.

Overview

This book is the sixth in a series that began in 1991. The first was edited by Gregory A. Kimble, Michael Wertheimer, and Charlotte L. White; the second by Kimble, C. Alan Boneau, and Wertheimer (1996); the third (1997), fourth (2000), and fifth (2003) by Kimble and Wertheimer; and now this one by Donald A. Dewsbury, Ludy T. Benjamin Jr., and Wertheimer. Wertheimer was thus involved in editing all six volumes, and Kimble, on the first five. The absence of the latter is thus conspicuous, but understandable, Kimble having passed away on January 15, 2006. It is therefore highly appropriate that the sixth volume has the dedication, “In memory of Gregory A. Kimble,” the psychologist who made a pioneering contribution in the creation of this series of volumes. As is noted in the book’s preface, the goal of the series is to “provide a set of chapters about both the scholarly and personal lives of psychologists who have made significant contributions to the development of the field” (p. ix). The earlier volumes contain chapters devoted to the lives and works of some of the greatest names in the history of psychology. Among the 104 previously covered pioneers are Mary W. Calkins, Sigmund Freud, Francis Galton, Clark Hull, William James, Carl Jung, Wolfgang Köhler, Ivan Pavlov, Edward...

Nevertheless, it is apparent from close inspection that the later volumes tend to contain, on the average, a smaller proportion of really “big names” in comparison to the earlier volumes.

That trend definitely continues in the sixth volume. To avoid subjective judgments about the relative standing of each of the 17 figures, I resort to two reference works, both titled *Biographical Dictionary of Psychology* (Sheehy, Chapman, & Conroy, 1997; Zusne, 1984). On the A-list are those in both sources: namely, James McKeen Cattell, Karl M. Dallenbach, Abraham H. Maslow, and Robert S. Woodworth. On the B-list are those in just one of the two: to wit, Henry A. Murray, Donald G. Paterson, Edmund Clark Sanford, David Shakow, Calvin Perry Stone, and Nikolaas Tinbergen.

Finally, in a more marginal spot as pioneers are those in neither biographical dictionary: Magda B. Arnold, Kenneth B. Clark, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Marion Almira Bills, Coleman Roberts Griffith, Mary Cover Jones, and Charles Henry Turner. Hence, 4 percent fall in the first tier; 35 percent in the second tier; and 41 percent, the plurality, in the third tier.

Admittedly, these tripartite assignments may not be totally justified, given that an entry in either dictionary is not a complete function of genuine merit. First, those psychologists who have died more recently often have to wait out a certain trial period—the “test of time”—before entering the hall of fame. This possibility may apply to a figure like Arnold, who died in 2002 and whose work is undergoing something of a revival. In a different way, this difficulty might have operated against Tinbergen, the Nobel laureate, because he died a few years too late to earn an entry in the earlier of the two biographical dictionaries (which only covered deceased notables). Second, inclusion on the A- or B-list may be subject to implicit ethnic or gender biases. Undoubtedly this problem may plague the placement of the two African Americans, Clark and Turner. Third, some undetermined extent, the differentiation may be confounded by within-discipline prejudices, such as emphasis on pure rather than applied research or favoritism toward science rather than practice. Such biases might have adversely affected Bills (industrial psychology), Clark (U.S. racial issues), Fromm-Reichmann (the treatment of psychotics), and Griffith (sports psychology).

All of these considerations being what they may, I think it is clear that the 17 psychologists vary in pioneer status. At the same time, I believe that any unprejudiced reader of the volume would have to conclude that each one of the 17 deserves to have a chapter written about him or her in this series. Even the most obscure, such as Bills, Griffith, and Turner, have strong claims to be considered bona fide pioneers in our discipline. Some may be foot soldiers and others commanders, but all are pioneers.

**Evaluation**

Again in the preface the editors assert that

> the chapters have been constructed to be authoritative yet accessible. The objective is to make the chapters of interest to undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members in psychology. They should be of interest not only to psychologists but also to scholars in many related fields. The chapters should be especially valuable in the field of the history of psychology. However, we hope that they may also be useful in courses and scholarly research in many of the diverse subfields of psychology. (p. ix)

How well do the chapters succeed in achieving these aims? Extremely well! There is no doubt that the chapters are authoritative. Indeed, the sixth volume may surpass the previous five on this score. As the editors note, “This volume is a bit of a departure from previous ones in that we have concentrated more on authors who have made substantial contributions to the field of the history of psychology” (p. x). Moreover, despite the greater historical expertise of the solicited writers, every chapter is extremely readable. Convoluted sentences, pedantic jargon, distracting footnotes, and esoteric digressions are delightfully absent or nearly so. As a result, every chapter can be read not just by any
psychologist, no matter what the level of training, but also by any scholar in the social, behavioral, and even biological sciences. In addition, all of the chapters—but especially those about the less well-known figures—should be of interest to historians of psychology, including those who teach the subject at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Finally, it should be apparent from the list of 17 pioneers that the volume should be attractive to psychologists who hail from its many distinct subdisciplines. After all, collectively the chapters cover comparative psychology, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, differential psychology, personality psychology, abnormal psychology, social psychology, clinical psychology, industrial psychology, and sports psychology.

Do I have any complaints? Well, just one, and a rather idiosyncratic quibble at that. As someone who conducts empirical research on eminent psychologists (e.g., Simonton, 2002), I would have liked the chapters to have been more homogeneous in their biographical coverage. This volume contrasts noticeably with the three-volume Models of Achievement: Reflections of Eminent Women in Psychology (O'Connell, 2001; O'Connell & Russo, 1983, 1988), in which key biographical facts are available for every chapter subject. This informational heterogeneity renders the volume much less useful for those psychologists, like me, who would like to identify the factors that contribute to a person attaining pioneer status or that determine the specific field in which that status is attained (cf. Simonton, 1992). Yet, given that the active researchers who share this interest might be counted on the fingers of one hand, I cannot exactly count this deviance as a deficiency. Accordingly, I can best draw two conclusions for everyone else in the world. First, this volume is a worthy addition to the series. Second, I look forward to the next volume. The series has itself attained the status of a pioneering achievement. And I mean that in the word's most exalted sense.

References