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Bizarre and Infamous Join Scholarship in an Archive of Psychology

By DAN HURLEY

AKRON, Ohio - Just 45 minutes from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, half an hour from the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton and two blocks from the Inventors Hall of Fame in this city's downtown is an attraction like no other.

Where else but at the Archives of the History of American Psychology can visitors see the uniforms and billy clubs used in the Stanford Prison Experiment, in which students ended up acting the role of guards all too realistically; watch a home movie of Freud batting fruit out of a tree with his cane; or have the bumps on their heads measured to calculate their personalities and career prospects with a 1933 psychograph?

Forty years after its founding at the University of Akron as a national repository for scholars, the archives - psychology's attic - have amassed not only the papers of more than 740 psychologists, but also a dazzling array of their instruments, ephemera, photographs and films. Although it is a beacon to historians from around the world and the source of hundreds of scholarly articles and books, the archives remains virtually unknown to the public at large.

"Never heard of it," said the administrator of an office one floor up in the same building.

No sign on Main Street here indicates the presence of the archives in, unfittingly enough, the basement of the former Polsky department store, now a branch of the University of Akron. Not even the directory next to the elevators on the main floor lists it.

"Isn't it amazing, all this stuff down in a basement in Akron?" asked the archive director, Dr. David B. Baker, who is also a professor of psychology at the university.

Surrounded by century-old devices as arcane as they are beautiful, Dr. Baker described his twin mission to increase the visibility of the archives and the field it illuminates. The archive was named an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution in 2003. In April, Roadway Express, the trucking company, announced that it was donating a large building next to the University of Akron to allow the archives to escape its basement hiding place and expand its public offerings.

"The field of psychology has mushroomed," he said. "It's getting more and more specialized. But we do have common roots. The place where we all meet is here, in our history."

He traced the roots of recent efforts to evaluate the level of consciousness of Terri Schiavo, the comatose Florida woman who died on March 31, to many of the antique instruments in the archives. Built more than a century ago of brass and glass, they were designed to measure perception and the discrimination of visual, audio and tactile stimuli. One instrument built around 1880, the chronoscope, could measure how long it took a person to react to a stimulus down to the hundredth of a second.

"Things like reaction time, which now seem deadly dull, were of the utmost importance," Dr. Baker said. "They were some of the very first scientific demonstrations of the ability to measure mind. That's what got people excited 100 years ago."

Testing was, in fact, the raison d'être of psychology until just after World War II, he noted, when psychologists were first permitted to offer clinical care in response to the needs of returning veterans.

Even the bizarre psychograph, Dr. Baker said, was predicated on a theory that remains a bedrock of modern research, that different regions of the brain have differing functions that can be measured and described. Although psychologists and neurologists of today measure those regions using magnetic resonant imaging, 19th-century phrenologists believed that those regions could be calculated from outside.

The device is one of three remaining in the United States. With its 1,954 parts housed in a walnut case, it sits in a corner of the reading room, its crown of calipers ready to measure every nook and node of the skull.

"You'll have to remove your glasses," John Bean, an undergraduate in psychology who works as an assistant at the archives, said as he put on latex gloves to place the sharp, heavy calipers on a visiting reporter's skull. In less than two minutes, it cranked out a kind of ticker tape giving a five-point rating, from "poor" to "excellent," on 28 personality variables like benevolence, suavity, caution, conscientiousness, acquisitiveness and conjugal love. The device automatically combined the variables to predict suitability for various professions, a process that Mr. Bean modernized with a computer spreadsheet.

"Do you want to see your results?" Dr. Baker asked. "Your highest score, you've got 70 percent on mechanic, followed by pugilist, at 60 percent. How did you do on journalist? Forty-five percent. You have a higher score as a zeppelin attendant."

Among the more than 1,000 instruments in the collection, a crown jewel is the simulated shock generator designed by Dr. Stanley Milgram. It was used in experiments in the early 1960's to investigate how far people would go to obey instructions from an authority figure. The participants were told that they were in a study on using electric shocks to penalize participants who failed a simple learning test. They were instructed to flick switches that would deliver steadily more intense shocks, from mild to dangerously severe. In fact, despite the convincing labels and knobs, the shocks were imaginary, and volunteers pretended to react in pain to the nonexistent shocks. Dr. Milgram found that nearly half of the real subjects followed orders to inflict pain that they were convinced was real. "It's probably one of the most important psychological experiments of the 20th century," Dr. Baker said. "It deals with a very fundamental question about the nature of good and evil. We like to believe that it would only be a very sick and evil person who would inflict torture on others. He showed us otherwise."

Standing 30 feet from the display, he demonstrated a more harmless test of conformity, conducted on visitors to the exhibition. A sign at the front entrance instructed visitors to step only on black tiles in a passageway with a floor of alternating black and white tiles. Sure enough, Dr. Baker watched as a family of visitors followed the instructions.

"They were like a group of ducklings there," he said. "That's what Milgram said, we're very compliant."

Similar conclusions were reached in the early 70's, when Dr. Philip G. Zimbardo of Stanford carried out his prison experiment in which students, told to act and dress as prison guards, quickly began mistreating other students dressed as prisoners. On display in addition to the guards' and prisoners' uniforms are fake cans of Chemical Mace and a cell door used in the experiment.

For all the interest generated by such displays, the primary draw to historians is a trove of psychologists' papers, the largest such collection in the world. Ronald F. Levant, president of the American Psychological Association, said the papers represented the field's "institutional memory."

Dr. Alexandra Rutherford, coordinator of one of only two graduate-level programs in the history of psychology, at York University in Toronto, said she and many of her students had often visited the archives.

"AHAP is a world-class resource for any historian of psychology or the social sciences," Dr. Rutherford said, adding that many articles published by psychology journals were based on research there.

"I can't tell you how many visits I've made, probably 25," said Ludy T. Benjamin Jr., professor of psychology at Texas A&M. "Probably 75 percent of what I've written in the last 30 years has come at least partially from that collection. Those are the best moments of my professional life, to be able to sit at one of those tables and read somebody else's mail. There's a real rush to that."

A bit of the frisson of discovery may be felt walking down Row 17 of the stacks, where the papers of Dr. Abraham Maslow, the humanistic psychologist, are in numbered boxes. Box M437, picked at random, had a folder marked "expression, spontaneity." Inside was a column of an undated article from The New Yorker torn from its surrounding page. The article, apparently addressing the question of why writers write, offered this dour answer, "All work and creative action is a way to snatch ourselves from the meaninglessness of transience."

Dr. Maslow would have none of it. In his angular, easily legible script, the psychologist famed for extolling the search for peak experiences had scribbled this typically Maslovian answer: "To objectify our subjective thought so as to be able to look at it and improve it toward perfection. To seek peak experiences."

Much as he knows that such papers offer profound insights into the history of psychology, Dr. Baker's passion for the peculiar and absurd in the equipment he guards is undeniable.

"It's a shame you won't be here on Friday," he said. "A U-Haul full of stuff from this place called the IQ Zoo is coming. They were the ones who worked with Skinner on a pigeon-guided missile. When a collection arrives, it's like Christmas morning. It's like, 'Oh my gosh, look at this stuff.' "

It was to make such "stuff" available that Dr. John A. Popplestone and the late Dr. Marion White McPherson, the married couple who taught psychology at the university, established the archives in 1965. Forced to teach a course on the history of psychology, Dr. Popplestone casually said to his wife one evening that the field would never amount to anything without a central archive.

He recalled her saying, "That's the best idea you've had in quite a while."

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