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Ohio Women in Psychology: A Biographical Account of

Mary Henle and Janet Taylor Spence

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In conducting a review of major contributors to the field of psychology, one would undoubtedly come across the names Mary Henle and Janet Taylor Spence. Not only were these two psychologists instrumental in the development of the field but they were also faced with challenges inexperienced by many of their colleagues. These challenges were due simply to the fact that they were women in a male dominated field and within a greater context, a male dominated society. In addition to their shared gender, these women have in common that they are both natives of Ohio. The current paper will provide a brief biographical account of the lives and careers of both of these outstanding psychologists.

Mary Henle (1913-2007)

*Family and Education*

Mary Henle was born July 14, 1913, in Cleveland, Ohio. Her parents were Leo and Pearl Henle. Leo Henle immigrated to the United States in 1880, at the age of fifteen from Stuttgart, Germany. Even at such a young age, he had already completed his Abitur, which is a term used to identify the final exams taken in secondary education. Upon arriving in the United States, he was forced by economic hardship to find work and he became a businessman but never stopped educating himself through adult education courses and through personal reading. Mary Henle wrote of her father, “he had always wanted to be a scientist...and through him, we made the early acquaintance of telescopes, microscopes, stereoscopes and other instruments” (Henle, 1983, p. 222). Mary’s mother Pearl attended medical school where she “graduated at the top of her class” (Henle, 1983, p.221). Mary had 2 siblings, a brother named Paul and a twin sister Jane. Mary grew up in a family environment that encouraged academic achievement and she felt

her and her siblings “were free to pursue any career [they] chose” (Henle, 1983, p. 221). Not surprisingly then is that all three of the Henle children took up careers in various fields of academia. Paul became a professor of philosophy, Jane’s field was classical archaeology, and Mary became a professor of psychology.

Mary Henle attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she majored in French. She received her Artium Baccalaureatus (A.B.) Degree in 1934. Although she majored in French, Mary did take some psychology courses and became so inspired by the faculty in the psychology department that she decided to remain at Smith College and to pursue a master’s degree in psychology. At the time she was enrolled psychology faculty included James and Eleanor Gibson, Harold Israel, Hanna Faterson, Elsa Siipola, and Kurt Koffka.

Mary Henle wrote of her experience, “I had been a member of the undergraduate class to whom Koffka read his manuscript as he was writing the *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935)...exciting times for an undergraduate!...we students had been privileged to read a classic before it was available to the psychological profession” (Henle, 1983, p. 222).

Upon obtaining her master’s degree in 1935, Mary stayed another year in the role of an assistant within the department of psychology. She later described her time at Smith as, “stimulating, mind opening years” (Henle, 1983, p. 223). Koffka continued to influence Henle during her time as an assistant; she assisted him in perceptual experiments. She wrote that by the time she entered into her doctoral program she was already committed to Gestalt psychology (Henle, 1983).

Henle entered into her doctoral program in 1936 at the University of Kansas, Bryn Mawr College. She studied under and worked with Harry Helson who is well known for the adaptation-level theory which quantified the effects of context on human perception and judgment. Her dissertation was supervised by Donald W. MacKinnon who is responsible for introducing her to the work of Kurt Lewin, who is often referred to as the “father of social psychology.” MacKinnon had studied at the Psychology Institute at the University of Berlin when it was directed by Wolfgang Köhler. The institute was the primary center of Gestalt psychology. Henle spoke of Bryn Mawr as “a good place for a developing Gestalt psychologist” (Henle, 1983, p. 223). She obtained her doctorate in 1939, during which time the country was still struggling to recover from the Great Depression.

### *Career*

After graduating, Henle secured a two-year position as a research assistant at Swarthmore College, a private liberal arts college in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. This position was synonymous to what is referred today as a post-doctoral fellowship. Henle has written that she wouldn’t have preferred to be anywhere more than Swarthmore (Henle, 1983). At the time, Swarthmore was the center of Gestalt psychology and included such faculty as Wolfgang Köhler (who had recently come from Germany), Robert MacLeod (who was the department chair at the time), Richard Crutchfield, Edwin Newman, Karl Duncker, and Hans Wallach. Köhler took great stock in Henle’s development. Henle wrote of their relationship, “To him I owe my greatest intellectual debt. And my relationship with the Köhler’s lasted over the years” (Henle, 1983, p. 224). In the same account she went on to describe how he even named her cat.

While at Swarthmore, Henle taught an undergraduate introductory to psychology course. She later taught at the University of Delaware but was there only for a brief period between 1941 and 1942 until she returned to Bryn Mawr and served as a professor until 1944. She later took a faculty position at Sarah Lawrence College from 1944 to 1946. In 1946, Henle received an invitation to join the faculty at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She remained there until her retirement in 1983. Although she retired in 1983, she remained an active contributor to academia and to the field until her death in 2007.

*On Being a Professional Woman*

Mary Henle did not pride herself on being a good female psychologist but instead found pride in the fact that she was a good psychologist. She attributes this to a lesson she took from her mother who was a physician, writing, “Mother understood...that the issue was to be a good physician, not to be a woman physician” (Henle, 1983, p. 221). Her mother served as an excellent model, teaching her to excel in whatever she did. In 1902, Mary’s mother Pearl became the first female doctor to go out on ambulance calls.

In an effort to secure that position Pearl wrote a letter in addition to her application that said she hoped her application would not be dismissed “simply because there have not been women on the staff before. Should I be so fortunate as to obtain a position on the staff, I would never ask or expect quarter even in the most inclement weather or under the greatest strain of work; and...upon receiving the first intimation of the impracticality of my being on the staff, I would deem it my duty to resign” (Henle, 1983, p. 221).

While attending Smith College, Mary reported that she did not receive the “subtle advice that had steered so many women out of the profession” (Henle, 1983, p. 222) but rather she was exposed to several women on the faculty that acted as inspirational models. Henle was encouraged to pursue experimental and theoretical psychology as these areas represented what psychologists were doing at the time.

Henle reported that during the time she was a young psychologist there was no women’s movement in psychology, stating that it was events like the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the Susan B. Anthony amendment of 1920 that opened opportunities for women of her generation. Henle speaks of her generation as being one of relative quiet but believes that her generation did leave a legacy by “quietly doing our jobs, not as women psychologists, but as psychologists...acceptance of women in psychology is the legacy of my generation to yours” (Henle, 1983, p. 229).

### *Major Contributions*

Among Mary Henle’s primary areas of interest and expertise were of Gestalt psychology, cognition, experimental psychology, and the history of psychology. She was involved in the publication of several instrumental written works including *Experimental Studies in Psychodynamic: A Laboratory Manual* (1948), *Documents of Gestalt Psychology* (1961), Köhler’s posthumous *The Task of Gestalt Psychology*, *The Selected Papers of Wolfgang Köhler* (1971), *Historical Conceptions of Psychology* (1973), MacLeod’s posthumous *The Persistent Problems of Psychology* (1975), *Vision and Artifact* (1976), and her own book *1879 and All That: Essays in the Theory and History of Psychology* (1986). In addition, to her involvement in these classic works, Henle’s articles were appeared in prominent peer reviewed journals such as the *Journal of*

*Experimental Psychology, the American Psychologist, and the Psychological Review* (Wertheimer, 1990).

Henle also played a significant role as a teacher and mentor to her developing students. Her “students reported that she required adherence to the highest standards of scholarship in everything they did” (Wertheimer, 1990). She did not expect of her students what she was not willing to do herself; she was an excellent model and could be found in the library reading from primary sources on a regular basis for hours at a time (Wertheimer, 1990).

In addition to Henle’s contributions to literature and academia she offered her time and expertise to several institutions in American psychology. She was senior scholar and consultant for Educational Services, Inc. She held a position on the board of advisors of the Archives of the History of American Psychology in Akron, Ohio. Additionally, she served as president of the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Division of the History of Psychology, the Division of Philosophical Psychology and of the Eastern Psychological Association (EPA). Her contributions to the field have been extensive and her work remains instrumental (Wertheimer, 1990).

#### Janet Taylor Spence (1923-present)

##### *Family and Education*

Janet Taylor Spence was born August 29, 1923 in Toledo, Ohio. Her parents were John C. Taylor and Helen Hodge Taylor. She had one younger sister named Christine. In the Taylor household, education for women was the rule. Both Spence’s grandmother and mother had graduated from Vassar College and her mother went on to complete her master’s degree in economics at Columbia. The Taylor family was very



involved in politics as Janet's father John was a labor union business manager and an active participant in the Socialist party. Her mother Helen, was active in the Republican Party, worked with the League of Women Voters, managed various election campaigns, and became the head of a social service agency serving families and dependent children (Deaux, 1990).

Spence decided to break the family tradition of attending Vassar College and instead decided on Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. She was disappointed however to find that first year students were not permitted to take psychology courses and when she was later permitted she was further disappointed that the department had a behaviorist/experimental theoretical orientation while she would have preferred humanism. She did however find solace in a history and systems course taught by Raymond L. Stetson that she took during her senior year. She recalled Stetson's ability to bring psychology to life (Taylor Spence, 1988).

In 1945 she began her graduate work at Yale but found the curriculum unappealing and the faculty unsupportive so she transferred to the University of Iowa after only one year. Her time at Yale was not a complete loss though; she met Kenneth Spence, co-creator of the Hull-Spence hypothesis and the man she would later marry. Her dissertation expanded on the Hull-Spence hypothesis where she looked at whether anxiety was a dispositional trait. There was no available measure to test her hypothesis so she developed the *Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale*. Since its conception, the scale has been widely used and became her most referenced work (Deaux, 1990).

### *Career*

After receiving her Ph.D. from the University of Iowa, Spence took a position at Northwestern University, becoming the first female on the faculty in the psychology department. Her hiring was controversial and was considered an experiment of sorts; the department chair thought "having a woman on the faculty was a novel and interesting idea" (Taylor Spence, 1988, p. 197). She later found out that many people on the faculty had strongly opposed her hiring. Even with this, she reported being treated well during her eleven years on the faculty stating however that her rate of promotion was slow.

After her time at Northwestern came to an end in 1960 she and Kenneth moved back to Iowa City but because of the nepotism law she was unable to get a position in the Department of Psychology at the university. Instead, she took a position as a research assistant but missed teaching very much. In 1964, the couple moved to Austin, Texas and again due to nepotism laws, Janet was unable to get a position in the Department of Psychology. Again, she took a research position; this time working at Austin State School. In the late 1960's Kenneth Spence died, only a few months after being diagnosed with cancer. During Janet's adjustment to the recent loss of her husband, the country was being "torn apart" by the Vietnam War (Taylor Spence, 1988, p. 199).

### *Major Contributions*

Although most of her early research focused on anxiety, there came a shift in Spence's research interests after reading a study conducted by her colleagues Helmreich and Aronson. She noted that their study was gender biased and replicated the study correcting for this limitation. This was her first study on gender and it led her to many years of gender research during which she developed the *Attitudes Toward Women Scale* and the *Personal Attributes*

*Questionnaire*. During the time that her work began to shift to gender issues she “began to receive invitations to give talks at other universities do that I could 'serve as a role model' for their women students. The implication, I think unintended, was that whether one had something worth listening to was relatively unimportant; it was enough to be a women” (Taylor Spence, 1988, p. 201).

Janet Taylor Spence became the President of the Southwestern Psychological Association 1972. She later became the sixth female president of the American Psychological Association in 1984. She wrote of her experience as President of APA saying, “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world, but I was glad when it was over!” In 1993, she was awarded the National Association of Scholars Award for Excellence in Scientific Reviewing. She has been awarded three honorary Doctor of Science degrees from Oberlin College, Ohio State University and the University of Toledo ((Deaux, 1990).

### Summary

Although, Mary Henle and Janet Taylor Spence shared the experience of being women psychologists and were both from Ohio, these two women had very different careers. Henle worked in a specialty that during the time was not considered a “female” specialty (Gestalt) while Spence began her research working with Kenneth Spence but once she established her own voice in the field, switched paths to study gender. Both of these women have made major contributions in their fields of study and in the lives of the students they taught. It is too often that women in the field go unrecognized for their contributions. It is wonderful to know that these two women were honored for their work during their careers. As an up and coming women in the field, I recognize and appreciate these women for their efforts and for the legacy that they have left for the next generation of psychologists.

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