

Child Saving and the Emergence of Vocational Psychology

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Vocational psychology emerged at the beginning of the 20th in a context of social and political change known as the “progressive era.” A popular progressive theme was “child saving,” a movement that expressed concern for the physical, educational, emotional, and social well-being of children and adolescents. Vocational guidance was one manifestation of this and served as the foundation for the emergence first of vocational psychology and later of counseling psychology. The concern for and care of youth was gradually replaced by the professionalization of psychology that over time has changed the focus and direction of vocational psychology. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA)

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The beginning of a new millennium conjures up endless images, questions, concerns, and ruminations about the future. For professional psychologists the future of professional practice is a popular topic of discussion. Managed care, empirically validated treatments, prescription privileges, and ever-blurring boundaries of professional practice and training have crowded the house at the end of the 20th century. While it seems fitting, almost required, to look ahead it can also be instructive to look back.

A retrospective look at vocational psychology is important for it helps to tell us where we are from and illuminates the impact that social forces have had on what we do, where we do it, and who is permitted to do it. This article examines the context in which vocational psychology emerged at the beginning of the 20th century and identifies the ways in which a concern for children was decisive in the growth and institutionalization of vocational psychology. As we enter the new century, the historical tradition of concern for the welfare of children has all but faded from research and practice in vocational psychology.

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

By 1900 the social, political, and economic landscape of America was gaining definition. The modern era had begun. Railroads spanned the continent, a forceful

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indicator that the frontier had been settled. Oil and steel were the flesh and blood of the industrial body that gave the nation economic strength. The appetite of this industrial body was voracious, consuming vast quantities of raw goods and human labor. The urban centers of the industrial northeast and Midwest swelled with immigrants and rural citizens drawn to the prospect of new life given animation by unbridled opportunity and, for the unsuspecting, an equal measure of ruin. The industrial city was a polyglot of technology. Telephones, electricity, moving pictures, automobiles, radio, and airplanes promised that technology, the application of science to industry, could improve individual lives and the collective good. The new technology depended on precision and efficiency. The factory and the assembly line made possible mass production that allowed for the rapid conversion of raw materials into finished goods. Waste and inefficiency were obvious detriments to progress (Watts, 1994).

Efficiency had as its cousin perfection. Looking forward at the beginning of the 20th century, perfection seemed possible. Centuries of science showed a steady rise in the ability of people to solve the mysteries of the physical universe and, once solved, made to serve humanity. However, at the beginning of the 20th century the rewards of improved efficiency in industry were of benefit to a small, privileged minority. He (and it was almost always a he) who owned the tools, the factory, the railroad, and the bank also owned most of the money and political power.

The belief in and striving for perfection had as its adherents not only those who saw an advantage for themselves at the expense of others, but also those who would promote the benefits of science and technology for the greater common good. Collectively this became known as "the progressive movement." Those identified as progressives sought a better social order through the application of scientific principles and Christian charity. A central tenant of the Progressive Party was that the government has an obligation to see to it that the institutions of society respond to the needs and concerns of the individual (Mann, 1975). On the national scene, political progressives would lobby on behalf of such goals as women's suffrage, government regulation of industry, child labor laws, and educational reform and included such notables as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

EFFICIENCY, PERFECTION, AND CHILD SAVING

Progressives, while politically and socially active, did not argue against the new science and social ideal of efficiency. In industry, progressive thought could be seen in the work of Frederick Taylor (Kanigel, 1997), whose theory of scientific management brought greater precision and productivity to manufacturing. Taylor advocated the scientific study of jobs in the belief that management could learn more efficient ways to train workers. Taylor saw improved efficiency as a benefit to all. The better trained worker was likely to be more productive, thus increasing the possibility of promotion and improved wages, greater profit for management, and a better product for the consumer (Taylor, 1911).

The social counterpart to industrial efficiency was a belief in the perfectibility of the individual and society. This was represented in a focus on youth as the hope

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