Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920): The Founding Father of Modern Psychology

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Wundt's Life

Wilhelm Wundt spent his early years in small towns near Mannheim, Germany. His childhood was lonely (his older brother was at boarding school), and his sole diversion seemed to be the fantasy of becoming a famous writer. His grades in school were poor. Wundt's father was a pastor, and although both parents were described as sociable, Wundt's memories of his father were unpleasant. Wundt recalled that one day his father visited the school and smacked him across the face for not paying attention to the teacher. Beginning in the second grade, his education was turned over to his father's assistant, a young vicar for whom the boy developed a strong emotional attachment. When the vicar was transferred to a neighboring town, Wundt became so upset that he was allowed to live with the vicar until the age of 13.

A strong tradition of scholarship was prevalent in the Wundt family, with ancestors of intellectual renown in virtually every field. Nevertheless, it seemed that this impressive line would not be continued by young Wundt. He spent more time daydreaming than studying, and he failed his first year at Gymnasium. He did not get along with his class- mates and was ridiculed by his teachers. Gradually, however, Wundt learned to control his reveries and even became relatively popular. Although he always disliked school, he worked to develop his intellectual interests and abilities. By the time he graduated at the age of 19, he was prepared for university studies.

Wundt decided to become a physician, to pursue the twin goals of working in science and earning a living. He undertook medical training at the University of Tübingen and the University of Heidelberg; at the latter he studied anatomy, physiology, physics, medicine, and chemistry. He came to realize that the practice of medicine would not be to his liking, and he changed his major to physiology.

After a semester of study at the University of Berlin with the great physiologist Johannes Müller, Wundt returned to the University of Heidelberg to complete his doctorate in 1855. He held an appointment as lecturer in physiology at Heidelberg from 1857 to 1864 and was

appointed laboratory assistant to Helmholtz. Wundt found it dreary to spend his time drilling undergraduates in their laboratory fundamentals, so he resigned from that duty. In 1864, he was promoted to associate professor, and he remained at Heidelberg for another 10 years.

While engrossed in his research in physiology, Wundt began to conceive of the study of psychology as an independent experimental scientific discipline. He first outlined his ideas in a book entitled Contributions to the Theory of Sensory Perception, published in sections between 1858 and 1862. He described his own original experiments, conducted in a makeshift laboratory built in his house, and he described the methods he considered appropriate for the new psychology, using the term "experimental psychology" for the first time. Along with Fechner's Elements of Psychophysics (1860), Wundt's Contributions book is considered to mark the literary birth of the new science.

The following year, Wundt published Lectures on the Minds of Men and Animals (1863). An indication of this book's importance was its revision almost 30 years later, with an English translation and repeated reprintings even after Wundt's death. In it Wundt discussed many issues—such as reaction time and psychophysics—that were to occupy the attention of experimental psychologists for years to come.

Beginning in 1867, Wundt taught a course at Heidelberg on physiological psychology, the first formal offering of such a course in the world. Out of his lectures came another significant book, Principles of Physiological Psychology, published in two parts in 1873 and 1874. Wundt revised the book in six editions over 37 years, the last published in 1911. Indisputably his masterpiece, the Principles firmly established psychology as an in- dependent laboratory science with its own problems and methods of experimentation.

For many years, successive editions of the Principles of Physiological Psychology served as a storehouse of information and a record of psychology's progress for experimental psychologists. The term "physiological psychology" in the title may be misleading. At the time, the word "physiological" was used synonymously with the German word mean- ing "experimental." Wundt was actually teaching and writing about experimental psy- chology, not physiological psychology as we know it today (Blumenthal, 1998).

The Leipzig Years

Wundt began the longest and most important phase of his career in 1875 when he be- came professor of philosophy at the University of Leipzig, where he worked prodigiously for 45 years. He established a laboratory at Leipzig shortly after he arrived, and in 1881 he founded the journal Philosophical Studies, the official publication of the new labora- tory and the new science. He had intended to call the journal Psychological Studies, but he changed his mind apparently because there already was such a journal (although it dealt with occult and spiritualistic issues). In 1906, Wundt was able to rename his jour- nal Psychological Studies. Now equipped with a handbook, a laboratory, and a scholarly journal, psychology was well under way.

Wundt's lab and his growing reputation drew a large number of students to Leipzig to work with him. Among these were many students who became pioneers, spreading their versions of psychology to subsequent generations. They included several Americans, most of whom returned to the United States to begin laboratories of their own. Thus, the Leipzig laboratory exerted an immense influence on the development of modern psychology, serving as the model

for new laboratories and continuing research. “Wundt and the psychological laboratory at Leipzig were known worldwide as a modern and out- standing scientific institution that provided an excellent introduction to the new experimental psychology” (Muhlberger, 2008, p. 169).

In addition to facilities established in the United States, laboratories were founded by Wundt’s students in Italy, Russia, and Japan. More of Wundt’s books were translated into Russian than any other language, and Russian adulation of Wundt led Moscow psy- chologists to construct a virtual duplicate of Wundt’s lab in 1912. Another replica was built by Japanese students at Tokyo University in 1920, the year Wundt died, but it was destroyed during a student riot in the 1960s.

Wundt was a popular lecturer. At one time the enrollment in his Leipzig courses exceeded 600 students. In his personal life, Wundt was quiet and unassuming, and his days were carefully regimented. In the morning, Wundt worked on a book or article, read student papers, and edited his journal. In the afternoon, he attended exams or went to the laboratory. An American student recalled that Wundt’s laboratory visits were limited to five or 10 minutes. Apparently, despite his faith in laboratory research, “he was not himself a laboratory worker” (Cattell, 1928, p. 545).

Later in the day, Wundt would take a walk and mentally prepare his afternoon lecture, which he habitually delivered at four o’clock. Evenings were devoted to music, politics, and—in his younger years—activities concerned with student and worker rights. He earned a comfortable living, and the family employed household servants and frequently entertained.