Article Title: The Pioneering Work of Leta Hollingworth in the Psychology of Women

Full Citation: Ludy T Benjamin, Jr., "The Pioneering Work of Leta Hollingworth in the Psychology of Women," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 493-505.


Date: 11/28/2012

Article Summary: Leta Hollingworth was born Leta A Stetter in 1886 on a farm near Chadron, Nebraska. She received her undergraduate education at the University of Nebraska and was editor of the *Daily Nebraskan*, graduating as a Phi Beta Kappa at the age of 19. She was an intellectually gifted woman with unbounded energy and ambition who was forced into a woman's traditional role after her marriage to Harry Hollingworth in 1908. But three years after their marriage, she was able to begin graduate work in educational psychology, earned her MA degree in 1913 from Columbia University and began putting traditional ideas about the inequality of women to the test. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Nebraska in 1938. She is best known for her many contributions in the areas of child psychology and education. She died at the age of 53. In 1944 the Leta Stetter Hollingworth Fellowship was established by her husband at Columbia University.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Leta A Stetter, Leta Hollingworth, Harry Levi Hollingworth, Margaret Elinor Danley, John G Stetter, James McKeen Cattell, G Stanley Hall, Edward L Thorndike, R C Dorr, Stephanie Shields, Karl Pearson, Louise Pound

Place Names: Chadron, Nebraska; New York City, New York; Lincoln, Nebraska; Valentine, Nebraska; McCook, Nebraska

Keywords: *Daily Nebraskan; Sombrero; Columbia University; University of Nebraska; New York Times Magazine; Clark University; Clearing-House for Mental Defectives [New York City]; The Psychology of the Adolescent* [textbook by Leta Hollingworth];

Photographs / Images: Harry Levi Hollingworth about 1915; Leta Stetter Hollingworth, 1910; Leta Hollingworth about 1920 while on the faculty of Columbia University in New York City
THE PIONEERING WORK
OF LETA HOLLINGWORTH IN THE
PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN

By LUDY T. BENJAMIN, JR.

As a young married woman living in New York City, Leta Hollingworth would occasionally, and quite unexpectedly, burst into tears for what her husband called "no apparent cause."¹ What he meant was that the immediate antecedent of these episodes was unknown. The cause was as painfully real to him as it was to her.

Leta Hollingworth was born Leta A. Stetter May 25, 1886, on a farm near Chadron, Nebraska, the daughter of Margaret Elinor Danley and John G. Stetter. During the first year of her life, Leta's mother kept a diary of her infant's development, a diary that would document the precocious gifts her child possessed.² Mrs. Hollingworth died when Leta was 3, and the task of her rearing passed to her maternal grandparents. Her early formal education was received in a one-room log schoolhouse, an education she later described as "excellent in every respect. We had small classes (twelve pupils, in all), all nature for a laboratory, and individualized instruction."³

At age 10 she moved with her grandparents to Chadron, and two years later she joined her father in Valentine, Nebraska. In 1902 at the age of 15, she was graduated from Valentine High School, the smallest girl in a class of eight students. There she had demonstrated her creative writing skills and in turn had been encouraged to further her development in college.⁴

As a freshman at the University of Nebraska in 1902, she pursued her interests in literature and writing, taking numerous courses in those areas. In addition she was active as literary
editor of the *Daily Nebraskan*. In her senior year she was associate editor of the *Sombrero* (the undergraduate annual of the university), assistant editor of the *Senior Book*, and class poet for the class of 1906.

Graduating at the age of 19 with Phi Beta Kappa honors, she hoped to pursue a career in writing — particularly focusing on the short story, a literary form she believed was beginning to “come of age.” However, her stories did not meet with success outside the university. In order to earn a living she accepted an offer at DeWitt, Nebraska, to serve as assistant principal and teacher. Her contract was not unusual. It indicated payment in “the sum of $60 per month for said services, and to keep the schoolhouse in good repair, to provide the necessary fuel and supplies, and to furnish janitor work.”

After a year at DeWitt and a subsequent year at the high school in McCook, Leta Stetter left Nebraska to marry her former college classmate, Harry Hollingworth, in New York City on December 31, 1908. Her husband-to-be was a graduate assistant to the eminent psychologist James McKeen Cattell at Columbia University. She sought a teaching position, only to discover that married women were not hired to teach in the schools of New York. She turned her spare energies to writing and again found herself thwarted when her stories were not accepted by publishers.

Concerning these years, Harry Hollingworth wrote:

> During the earlier years of married life Leta Stetter Hollingworth's time and energy were chiefly consumed by housework, cooking, dressmaking, mending, washing, ironing, making her own hats and suits and endless other domestic duties in the frugal apartment home. Almost always she effectually stifled her own eager longing for intellectual activity like that of her husband. Day after day, and many long evenings, she led her solitary life in the meagerly furnished quarters, while he was away at regular duties or seizing on this and that opportunity to earn a few dollars on the side, by lectures, tutoring and assorted odd jobs not usually included in the career of a scholar.

> “Staying at home eating a lone pork chop” was the way she sometimes facetiously described her experience in these days. There were occasional periods of discouragement... These slips from her customary determined and courageous procedure she could hardly explain then, even to herself. Later she was able to make it clear that it was because she could hardly bear, with her own good mind and professional training and experience, not to be able to contribute to the joint welfare more than the simple manual activities that occupied her.

The frustration she felt, however, laid the ground work for a
new career. Leta Hollingworth, intellectually gifted and with unbounded energy and ambition, was forced into a woman's traditional role for which she had no desire. Since their marriage, the Hollingworths had attempted to save money for the tuition for Leta's graduate education. Continued illnesses in her family in Nebraska depleted their reserves. As a result, Harry Hollingworth began to take additional jobs outside his university position to increase their income. These jobs were in the area of applied psychology — consulting with businessmen, mostly about advertising — an activity he found distasteful, yet one which paid well and one which would allow his wife the educational opportunities they both desired.7

Three years after their marriage, Leta began graduate work in educational psychology, and earned her M.A. degree in 1913 from Columbia University. It was at this time that she decided to look critically at the status of women. As a woman who had been rebuffed in a "man's world," she wanted to know why women were regarded as relatively inferior to men. What were the facts which supported this position? Were women inherently inferior, restricted because of their biology, or were they the unwarranted victims of a male-dominated social order? She began by reading everything she could locate on the subject of sex differences. Claims for the inferiority of women were in the published works of the most famous psychologists of the early 20th century — James McKeen Cattell, G. Stanley Hall, and Edward L. Thorndike. Yet in her reading Leta Hollingworth found no scientific data which were supportive of these claims. Typical assertions were:

Women are actually inferior in their abilities to men and should be treated accordingly.

Women have just as “good” abilities as men, but these talents lie all in the direction of sympathy, tenderness, nursing, child care, decoration, and the like.

Women are primarily and biologically chiefly sex objects, and their primary role is and ought to be based on their reproductive function. At most they should merely serve as interesting companions to men.

Women, by virtue of the rhythm of their menstrual functions, experience regularly recurring interferences with the use of all their abilities, and must be considered for a considerable part of each lunar period as invalids, or semi-invalids.

Women as a species are less variable among themselves than are men; all women are pretty much alike but men range enormously in their talents and defects. This was used to explain at the same time the greater frequency of men in the lists of dis-
The last of these assertions held the most interest for Dr. Hollingworth, in part because it was an assertion which could be put to a scientific test. That is, it was stated precisely enough to allow for empirical verification. This assertion was commonly known as the variability hypothesis, and its history was dubious to say the least. In the early part of the 19th century, the anatomist, Johann Meckel, argued that the human female was considerably more variable than the male and "since man is the superior animal" then variation must be a sign of inferiority. A half century later, Charles Darwin emphasized the importance of variation as the principal means through which progress in a species could be obtained. Following the publication of Darwin's ideas, "the greater variability of the human male began to be affirmed everywhere in men's written opinions."

The "fact" of greater male variability seemed obvious at both ends of the continuum. There were more males in institutions for the "feeble-minded" than females. At the other extreme Thorndike pointed to

the patent fact that in the great achievements of the world in science, art, invention, and management, women have been far excelled by men. . . . In particular, if men differ in intelligence and energy by wider degrees than do women, eminence in and leadership of the world's affairs of whatever sort will inevitably belong oftener to men. They will oftener deserve it.

R. C. Dorr, writing in the New York Times Magazine in 1915, described the hypothesis as follows:

Men, it is held, have a greater range of intellect; they climb higher and sink lower than women. They give the world more geniuses, likewise more idiots. They are capable of greater morality, and also of greater immorality. Most of the prophets and teachers and also most criminals have been men. Men show more variability even in their anatomical structure than women, who persistently tend to averages, both mental and physical. Men then will forever outstrip women, who, as a sex, are capable only of average achievements.

Psychologist Stephanie Shields has emphasized a major extension of the variability hypothesis in the field of education:

If women were less likely to have above-average ability, it would not be reasonable to expect achievement from them. Their education should, therefore, be geared to preparing them for the activities in which they were most likely to engage.

In other words, educational programs for women should stress domestic skills. Indeed, G. Stanley Hall at Clark University and
E. L. Thorndike at Columbia had proposed "specialized" curricula for women.

The variability hypothesis flourished in the early 1900's principally on what Dr. Hollingworth referred to as "armchair dogma." It could be found in the literature of psychology, education, medicine, and sociology. The only major critic was British psychologist Karl Pearson who had published a study in 1897 in which he found no differences in variability of males versus females. Until the work of Leta Hollingworth, this study was the only scientific investigation of the variability hypothesis which had been published.

In 1913 a temporary position opened at the Clearing-House for Mental Defectives in New York City for someone to aid in its mental testing program. Dr. Hollingworth took the job, and her work proved so effective her position with the agency was made permanent. This position was important to her for a number of reasons, perhaps the most important being that it gave her a chance to collect data on one aspect of the variability hypothesis. In had been frequently noted that the proportion of men to women in institutions for the mentally defective was much greater than should be expected, given the ratio of males to females in the general population. Dr. Hollingworth examined 1,000 cases diagnosed at the Clearing-House during 1912 and 1913. In absolute terms males did exceed females, 568 to 432. However, what she discovered was a most interesting age bias. For individuals over 16 years of age at the time of admission, 78 were males while 159 were females. And for individuals over 30 years of age, 9 were males and 28 were females. Concerning these data she wrote:

At present it suffices to point out that the fact that females escape the Clearing-House till beyond the age of thirty years three times as frequently as males, fits very well with the fact that more males than females are brought to the Clearing-House, on the whole. The boy who cannot compete mentally is found out, becomes at an early age an object of concern to relatives, is brought to the Clearing-House, and directed toward an institution. The girl who cannot compete mentally is not so often recognized as definitely defective, since it is not unnatural for her to drop into the isolation of the home, where she can "take care of" small children, peel potatoes, scrub, etc. ... Thus they survive outside of institutions.

In a later study whose results supported her research at the Clearing-House, she wrote, "A girl must be relatively more stupid than a boy in order to be presented for examination and
she must be still more stupid, comparatively, to be actually segregated as unfit for social and economic participation. ¹⁶

In 1914 Dr. Hollingworth published a major review article in which she critiqued a number of papers which had dealt with the variability hypothesis.¹⁷ Her closing remarks in this paper provided an outline for her future research in this area:

Briefly our thesis may be summed up thus:

1. The greater variability of males in anatomical traits is not established, but is debated by authorities of perhaps equal competence.

2. But even if it were established, it would only suggest, not prove, that men are more variable in mental traits also. The empirical data at present available on this point are inadequate and contradictory, and if they point either way, actually indicate greater female variability.

3. But even if it were established that there actually is greater male variability in mental traits, it would only suggest, not prove, that there is greater inherent variability. For (a) the opportunity and exercise of the sexes has been dissimilar and unequal; (b) intellectual variability has had survival value for men, but for women it has had little or none — this by virtue of the different parts played by the sexes in the perpetuation of the species.

4. It must be remembered that variability in and of itself does not have social significance unless it is known in what the variability consists.

5. It is undesirable to seek for the cause of sex differences in eminence in ultimate and obscure affective and intellectual differences until we have exhausted as a cause the known, obvious, and inescapable fact that women bear and rear the children, and that this has had as an inevitable sequel the occupation of housekeeping, a field where eminence is not possible.

The first of these points was attacked in an article published in 1914.¹⁸ The study was conceived to answer the question, "Are male human beings inherently more variable in anatomical traits than female human beings?" Dr. Hollingworth decided to use infants rather than children or adults, since they would be free of the differences in environmental conditions which could account for variability differences in adults. Her reasoning on variability as it then existed she explained as follows:

The lives of men and women are lived under conditions so different as to constitute practically different environments. . . . We should expect to find adult males more variable than adult females, because the males are free to follow a great variety of trades, professions, and industries, while women have been confined to the single occupation of housekeeping, because of the part they play in the perpetuation of the species. Thus variability has had comparatively little survival value for women. A woman of natural herculean strength does not wash dishes, cook meals, or rear children much more successfully than a woman of ordinary muscle. But a man of natural herculean strength is free to abandon carpentry or agriculture and become a prize-fighter or a blacksmith, thus exercising and enhancing his native equipment.¹⁹
Dr. Hollingworth began to collect her data from the files of the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. For every infant born in this hospital, ten anatomical measurements were routinely obtained, including weight, length, circumference of shoulders, and seven cranial measurements. She analyzed these data for one thousand consecutive males and one thousand consecutive females. In brief she found that male infants were slightly larger than the female infants on all anatomical variables in her study. However, there were no differences in variability between the sexes. For the first time a serious crack had appeared in the armor of the variability hypothesis.

Her next research efforts centered on the female menstrual cycle, that hormonal rhythmicity that rendered women as “invalids or semi-invalids.” The study she planned was to be her doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, and it was to be supervised by Professor Edward L. Thorndike, a great proponent of the variability hypothesis. Her subjects were twenty-three females and two males (as controls) and she tested them over a period of three months in tasks that involved perceptual and motor abilities as well as mental abilities. She found that there
were no differences in performance associated with any phase of the menstrual cycle.  

Dr. Hollingworth received her Ph.D. degree in 1916. At that point she was the author of one book and nine scientific papers, all concerned with the psychology of women. In that same year she authored a significant paper in which she elucidated the social controls exerted on women for the bearing and rearing of children. She was reacting to generally held opinions such as “only abnormal women want no babies,” and “normally woman lives through her children; man lives through his work.” Medicine, public opinion, law, education, and art were all shown to reflect the consensus attitude of the value of woman in the “natural” role of maternity. She noted that these social mechanisms confounded the child bearing process and thus distorted the true picture of maternity:

It seems very clear that “the social guardians” have not really believed that maternal instinct is alone a sufficient guaranty of population. They have made use of all possible social devices to insure not only child-bearing, but child-rearing. Belief, law, public opinion, illusion, education, art ... have all been used to re-enforce maternal instinct. We shall never know just how much maternal instinct alone will do for population until all the forces and influences exemplified above have become inoperative. As soon as women become fully conscious of the fact that they have been and are controlled by these devices the latter will become useless, and we shall get a truer measure of maternal feeling.

Leta Hollingworth’s research on the psychology of women ended shortly after receiving her doctoral degree, although she continued to publish articles on the subject for a number of years. In the fall of 1916, she accepted a position at Columbia University Teachers College as an instructor in educational psychology replacing Dr. Naomi Norsworthy who had just died. Dr. Hollingworth would spend the rest of her life in research begun by Norsworthy, into the psychology of the exceptional child. Her published works during these years included eight books and seventy-four articles, only four of them about the psychology of women.

She wrote on the vocational aptitudes of women, calling for an end to the myths regarding the vocational potential of women. When the council of Phi Beta Kappa decided to limit eligibility of women in that society, Leta Hollingworth was quickly in print to call attention to the implications of this policy. In a collaborative effort with anthropologist Robert
Lowie, the notion of innate female inferiority was examined from a number of data sources including anatomical, physiological, and cross-cultural studies. Their summary of the literature pointed to the lack of evidence for any inherent female inferiority, and the abundance of folklore, superstition, and social mores which served as active restraints on women.

Dr. Hollingworth’s final published contribution to the psychology of women appeared in 1927. In this work she described an evolutionary theory of the development of sex roles and the importance of the discovery of paternity for the eventual beginning of change in those roles.

The woman question is and always has been simply this: How to reproduce the species and at the same time to win satisfaction of the human appetites for food, security, self-assertion, mastery, adventure, play, and so forth. Man satisfies these cravings by competitive attack, both physical and mental upon the environment. As compared with man, woman has always been in a cage, with those satisfactions outside. The cage has been her cumbersome reproductive system.

Why did she abandon her work in the psychology of women? Shields has speculated on this point emphasizing the peculiar social setting from which Leta Hollingworth viewed the world.

Perhaps it was her optimism that led Hollingworth to set aside the psychology of women as a primary concern. . . .In an academic setting in New York City it may have been easy to underestimate the persistence of values held by the majority of the population. Science, it seemed, was becoming more objective as witnessed by psychology’s emphasis on behavioral study. The feminist’s goal of enfranchisement was achieved in 1920. It may have appeared that there was no longer a pressing need for her work in female psychology. In addition her own interests expanded and the demands of her clinical and educational work left little time for the endeavor that had been her own creation.

Although she never published again in this area, her interest in the subject remained quite strong. She made plans for a volume that would comprise the whole question of the psychology of women, a volume she intended to entitle “Mrs. Pilgrim’s Progress.” Concerning this plan her husband wrote:

She had in part outlined the contents of such a volume, had saved many clippings and much other relevant material, but always had to postpone it as more urgent things appeared. The world never allowed Leta S. Hollingworth to forget that she was a woman, and she in turn never wholly abandoned her original project to depict the long and torturous path of Mrs. Pilgrim’s progress. But this project was left incomplete, and it can never be finished by another hand.

In her day she was well known in New York as the “scientific pillar” of the women’s movement. A feature article on her work...
Leta Hollingworth (about 1920) when on the faculty of Columbia University in New York City.

appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1915. She was a member of the Woman’s Suffrage Party and a frequent marcher (with her husband) in suffrage parades. In addition she was active in New York City as a speaker for women’s status.

Yet she is best remembered today for her many contributions in the areas of child psychology and education. In the period 1916-1920, most of her publications involved children who were retarded or suffered some educational deficiency. However, in the early 1920’s there was a marked shift in her research. She began to look at the other end of the intellectual continuum, to those children who had exceptional intellectual potential. What kinds of educational opportunities were available to meet their needs? She discovered that most psychologists and educators were of the opinion that “the bright can take care of themselves.” Thus she devoted the remainder of her life to this area, achieving national fame as an authority on exceptional children. Her textbook, *The Psychology of the Adolescent*, was used for a number of years as the best source available.

She received a number of formal honors, including biographical sketches which appeared in *American Men of Science, Who’s Who in Literature, and Who’s Who in the East*. However, the honor she cherished the most was first revealed to her by her life-long friend Louise Pound, then on the faculty at the
University of Nebraska. Professor Pound told her that she should "accept no engagements for the [1938] Commencement period . . . so as to be free to come to Lincoln, Nebraska." In June of that year she was awarded an honorary doctorate of laws degree by the university. While in Lincoln, she addressed an alumni banquet on the subject of Nebraska's contribution to the artistic and intellectual leadership of the nation. She reported that in a national study "Nebraska was found to rank third among the states in the production of American notables of the nineteen-twenties, being bettered by Massachusetts and Connecticut only."

While in Lincoln, Dr. Hollingworth persuaded her husband to participate in what seemed to him an untimely task. He recalled that they went together to Wyuka Cemetery, where we purchased for ourselves a tiny plot of ground on the eastern slope of a grassy mound. L. S. H., in a mood that was strangely foreign to her up to that time, had become seriously concerned over the provision for our final resting place, and she expressed a desire to make such an arrangement now. The prescient nature of this act was then, by me at least, wholly unsuspected, and I little dreamed that in another eighteen months I would be bringing her there to rest forever in the spot she had chosen.

Leta Hollingworth was 53 years old when abdominal carcinoma terminated her life. Her professional career covered a mere twenty-five years, yet her accomplishments were numerous. Evidence of her literary productivity until almost the time of her death is confirmed by the posthumous publication of several books and articles she had prepared.

While she lived more than half her life in New York, she continued to cherish her ties to Nebraska. In a letter to a friend she wrote, "I shall never cease to rejoice that I was born on the limitless prairies. To grow up on their expanse means to 'see in long stretches,' to scorn boundaries, to go 'free' all one's life."

The character of Leta Hollingworth was formally memorialized in 1944 by a $51,000 gift from her husband to Columbia University. It inaugurated the Leta Stetter Hollingworth Fellowship to be awarded yearly to a woman pursuing graduate study at Columbia. Its provisions stipulated that the recipient was to be a woman graduate from the University of Nebraska "most likely to emulate the character and career of Leta Stetter Hollingworth." Preference was to be given to women born in or receiving their early education in Nebraska.
In a "home-coming letter" to the *Nebraska State Journal* two years prior to her death Dr. Hollingworth wrote:

One more thing I would say. Sometime I shall come back to Nebraska for good. I was born there. I was reared there. I was educated there. I shall take the last long sleep there. The East is too alien for purposes of eternal sleep.\(^40\)

**NOTES**

4. Psychologist Lewis Terman (responsible for the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test) remarked that one of the poems Leta wrote at age 14 "compares favorably with the best juvenilia this reviewer has seen." Terman, Review of *Leta Stetter Hollingworth: A Biography*. by H. L. Hollingworth. *Journal of Applied Psychology* (August, 1944), 357-359.
5. H. L. Hollingworth, 77.
15. L. S. Hollingworth, "Variability as Related to Sex Differences in Achievement," 510-530.
17. L. S. Hollingworth, "Variability as Related to Sex Differences in Achievement," 528-529.
22. It is puzzling that Leta Hollingworth does not include religious controls in her analysis. Her religious background would indicate that she was aware of religious constraints on women. Why this omission is an interesting question; unfortunately, there are no easy clues to its answer.
29. S. A. Shields, 856.
32. H. L. Hollingworth, 103.
33. Published by D. Appleton in 1928.
34. H. L. Hollingworth, 169.
37. From the second volume of an unpublished autobiography entitled "Years at Columbia" by Harry L. Hollingworth. A copy is in the Archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society. The first volume is entitled "Born in Nebraska."
38. H. L. Hollingworth, 1943, 52.
39. From the Harry and Leta Hollingworth papers, Archives of the History of American Psychology, University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.
40. H. L. Hollingworth, 1943, 16.
The lack of parking near the Society’s Lincoln Museum makes it very difficult for school groups to visit the building.

Eric S. McCready, director of the Elvehjem Art Center, University of Wisconsin at Madison, made the principal address at the Annual Fall Meeting in the Lincoln Hilton.