


# A HISTORY OF *Psychology* IN LETTERS

SECOND EDITION

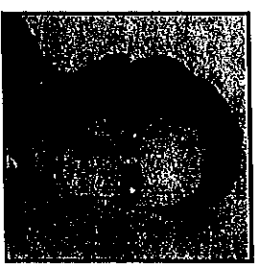
LUDDY T. BENJAMIN, JR.

2006

Malden, MA:  
 Blackwell  
Publishing

14

CHAPTER



David Krech (left) and Ross Stagner (right)  
(Krech photo from the Archives of the History of American Psychology/University of Akron;  
Stagner photo courtesy of Rhea Stagner Das)

## A Social Agenda for American Psychology

By the beginning of the 1920s, much of the American public seemed convinced that the science of psychology held the keys to prosperity and happiness. Newspaper columnists urged the public to seek psychologists for advice about marriage, child rearing, and the selection of a career; businesses were urged to consult psychologists about employee selection; and educators were encouraged to use psychologists to improve educational methods. One columnist told his readers: "You cannot achieve these things [effectiveness and happiness] in the fullest measure without the new knowledge of your own mind and personality that the psychologists have given us" (Wiggam, 1928, p. 13). Public interest in psychology was strong, as is reflected in the publication of a number of popular psychology magazines, popular psychology books, and home-study courses intended to help people better their lives through psychology. Public demand for psychological services was high, and because there were not enough psychologists interested in applying their science, many individuals with little or no training in psychology emerged to fill the void.

The stock market crash in September, 1929 ended the public euphoria and ushered in a decade of economic and psychological depression, so much so that by literary convention it gets capitalized as the Great Depression. Although the United States has suffered a number of economic depressions in its approximately 230-year history, there is a reason that one of those has the adjective "Great." It is - especially in terms of longevity - the worst depression on record. Unemployment reached unbelievable levels of nearly 25 percent. Millions of people suddenly found themselves out of work, homeless, and hungry. It was a time of soup kitchens, apple carts, and "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" "Riding the rails" was the phrase used for the hundreds of thousands who lived in the boxcars of trains, traveling from one community to another, looking for work, a meal, or trying to escape from the police. It was the time of the dustbowl, when drought and winds rendered the farmland in Oklahoma useless and sent thousands of "Okies" west to California, where they became exploited as part of migrant farm labor, the subject of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). It was a time of lawlessness and movie marquis criminals - John Dillinger, Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd, George "Machine Gun" Kelly, and Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow.

Labor unions began to grow in influence in the 1930s, especially after Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President of the United States. Soon there were major strikes across the country - in San Francisco; Flint, Michigan; Chicago - some of them quite violent. There were escalating racial tensions as activism grew in the African-American community, both in the cities of the North and amid the Jim Crow practices of the South. There were signs of a war brewing in Europe, with the rise of the fascist dictator, Adolf Hitler, in Germany. By 1938, the German army had taken Austria and Czechoslovakia, and by 1939, Poland.

It was in the midst of the Great Depression and the escalating European conflict that a new psychological organization was formed, one that had a clear public agenda (and perhaps a private one). It was an extremely controversial organization and its founding represented an act of courage, because there were many, no doubt, who saw the society as a communist or socialist organization - psychologists promoting pinkism, that is, leftist views (indeed, the FBI established a file on the organization in the 1930s; see Harris, 1980). The organization was named the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and it continues today as one of more than 50 divisions of the American Psychological Association.

The American Psychological Association (APA) was founded in 1892 and had always been dominated by psychologists in university settings. As opportunities for employment of psychologists outside of academic settings grew, there was pressure on the APA to broaden its mission to serve the interests of these applied psychologists. In response to that pressure an APA Division on Consulting Psychologists was founded in the 1920s, but it was never able to do much for the applied psychologists. The APA leadership actively resisted the centrifugal forces that sought to extend psychology beyond the campus, including those voices that

sought an application of psychological science to social problems. And in the 1930s, as already noted, there were plenty of social problems facing Americans and the rest of the world: unemployment, hunger, racism, labor-management disputes, and impending war.

The beginnings of SPSSI can be traced to 1935, when psychologists Ross Stagner (1909-1997) and Isadore Krechevsky (later David Krech, 1909-1977), both about age 26 and at the beginning of their careers, talked about common frustrations such as the unemployment faced by new psychologists, the avoidance of political questions by psychologists, and the lack of opportunity for psychology to contribute solutions to the social ills of the day (Stagner, 1986). Their conversation led to a plan of action to organize psychologists with similar interests. In February of 1936, Krechevsky wrote to a small number of psychologists he felt might be kindred spirits. Sixteen, in addition to Stagner and Krechevsky, agreed to be part of an organizing committee. Acting as secretary, Krechevsky mailed a letter in March to several hundred members of the APA describing the plans for the new organization and asking for indications of interest.

The initial organizing meeting was held in September of that year in conjunction with the annual meeting of the APA at Dartmouth College. More than 100 psychologists attended a special meeting of the social issues group. Stagner chaired the meeting and Krechevsky served as secretary. Krechevsky announced that he had already received over 200 expressions of interest in the society from his earlier mailing and had collected \$63.13 in advance dues and assessments. "Those present readily agreed that \$63.13 in the depression year of 1936 was sufficient evidence of interest to justify formalizing an organization" (Krech & Cartwright, 1956, p. 471). Goodwin Watson was elected the first chairperson of the organization and Krechevsky the first Secretary-Treasurer. Ten others were elected to the first Council of Directors, which included several distinguished psychologists of that time: Edward C. Tolman, Gardner Murphy, and Gordon Allport. Following the meeting, a letter was mailed to the entire APA membership offering charter membership of SPSSI to anyone who joined before the end of 1936.<sup>1</sup> The letter explained the two goals of the new society as follows:

One is to encourage research upon those psychological problems most vitally related to modern social, economic and political policies. The second is to help the public and its representatives to understand and to use in the formation of social policies, contributions from the scientific investigation of human behavior. (Krech & Cartwright, 1956, p. 471)

That was the public agenda, and it was largely the motivation for the involvement of many early SPSSI members. The somewhat private agenda involved the As a result of the mailing, 333 of the APA's nearly 2,000 members joined the new organization. A year later, SPSSI requested formal identification with APA and was granted affiliate status by APA's Council of Directors.

problem of unemployment of psychologists, a problem exacerbated by the influx of European psychologists fleeing the Nazi regime (see Chapter 13). Some of the SPSSI organizers hoped to manufacture jobs for psychologists by creating a social agenda for behavioral research (see Finison, 1976, 1979).

In the years that followed, SPSSI encouraged research on social issues and even established its own journal, the *Journal of Social Issues*, to publish such research. It supported the application of psychological knowledge to social problems as diverse as divorce and war. It also acted to help psychologists who might be persecuted for their political beliefs or social activism. And it also helped to organize psychological support, including the APA, for various social issues.

That SPSSI has been successful is evidenced in part by the fact that the APA has amended its bylaws to include, as one of its three goals, the promotion of human welfare. Today the APA is organized into four directorates, one of which is Public Interest. Such APA involvement is a direct result of the success of SPSSI in convincing the broader psychological community of the importance of a social agenda for psychology.

The letters that follow are taken from the SPSSI Papers, which are part of the Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron. The first three letters are in response to a February, 1936 letter from Krechevsky intended to recruit members for an organizing committee. Those are followed by the organizing letter mailed in March, 1936, followed by many responses to that letter. They illustrate a great diversity of responses to Krechevsky's call to social arms and tell part of the story of how this very important psychological society began.<sup>2</sup>

### The Letters



Junius Flagg Brown<sup>3</sup> [University of Kansas] to Isadore Krechevsky,  
February 26, 1936

I hasten to answer your letter of Feb. 24. You may count on me to support your society both with time and with somewhat paltry monetary donations... As an

<sup>2</sup> Another psychological organization also formed in 1936: the American Association for Applied Psychology (AAAP). That group was concerned with improving the consulting and practice opportunities of psychologists, and not with the involvement of psychologists in social issues. When the American Psychological Association reorganized in 1945, AAAP and SPSSI merged with APA, becoming several of the APA's divisions (Benjamin, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> J. F. Brown was a social psychologist and student of Lewin and, like most of the members of SPSSI, his politics leaned to the left. When he wrote this letter his book, *Psychology and the Social Order* (1936), had just been published. It has sometimes been characterized as a Marxist approach to social psychology. Brown said that he wrote the book because the other textbooks on social psychology were so inadequate: "They have little or nothing to say about the great social problems created by the economic and cultural crisis that all competent observers realize is now at hand" (p. v).

earnest [sic] of my good intent I am enclosing my check for \$5.00 and will try to send you more later. Also I will be glad to serve on the organizational committee. My only suggestion is that we attempt to gain first support of the relatively few psychologists who are really politically literate rather than the wholesale support of the so called socially minded. Secondly I suggest that the organization is in no way officially to be affiliated with the A.P.A. as the embarrassment might be mutual. Thirdly that the cooperation and membership of scientists in closely related fields like sociology and philosophy be asked and allowed.

Gordon W. Allport<sup>4</sup> [Harvard University] to Krechevsky, March 6, 1936

I think I am willing to serve on your organizational committee. Certainly I am willing in principle. My only doubts come from the question of how predetermined the policies are. Your letter is persuasive and for the most part unexceptionable. There is, however, a slightly over-emotional tone that might raise the question whether the committee itself is able to see issues clearly, and to pursue facts in an unbiased way.

In red I have made a few verbal suggestions for diminishing the excited tone of the letter. The passages in parentheses, might, for example, be deleted without loss of force and with a gain in dignity... It is necessary to postpone platforms, I think, until various regional meetings have been held. Most important of all, it will be necessary to have answers to meet the coming ridicule and objections of the "pure" psychologists. Being a rather individualistic lot, I think the platform, to have any appeal, must be entirely unemotional, brief, and calculated to admit results and judgments that may in essence be neo-socialistic. We would discredit social planning, the profession, and ourselves, if we prejudged the outcome of our respective researches...

James Harlan Elder [Yale University] to Krechevsky, March 14, 1936

Considering my professional contacts your letter [of February 24] comes as a ray of promise that psychologists aren't all quite as hopeless as I have judged them. Several times I unhappily have concluded that no group of scientists could be as indifferent and provincial as psychologists... I still don't see quite why psychological training shouldn't serve as a somewhat better than average scientific background for thinking about the world we live in... I do not feel that my name on your committee would strengthen it much. It looks good as it stands. Furthermore

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Allport (1897-1967) was a professor at Harvard University, best known for his development of personality theory. He published a landmark book in 1954 that was particularly salient to SPSSI interests, entitled *The Nature of Prejudice*. His letter shows the political wisdom of someone a little more senior than Krechevsky and Stagner.

I haven't any funds to spare at this time. But you must not take this as the usual liberal attitude of approval but no participation. I am as earnest about the proposition as anyone and I will give my services and money as soon as possible . . .

*Krechevsky and 17 Other Members of the Organizing Committee, including J. F. Brown and Gordon Allport, and Ross Stagner to Members and Associates of the American Psychological Association, ca. March 1936<sup>5</sup>*

This letter is being sent to you by a group of associates and members of the A.P.A. which has organized itself as a temporary body to help express the attitudes of American psychologists on the important economic and political issues of today. We do not believe it at all necessary to belabor the fact that an economic depression exists in these United States and in the world around us. That other spheres than the purely economic have been affected is also obvious to most of us. Psychology and our other sciences are no less affected. We need but appeal to our own experiences to obtain instances of the senseless fate our present society has assigned to the many capable psychologists we have been turning out with so much hope. Most of us have probably tried to do some hard-headed thinking about this situation and all of its implications. It is becoming increasingly evident that such thinking is more than a "proper" mental exercise; it is, we believe absolutely essential *if we are to be allowed to continue as scientists at all*. Unfortunately, scientists in the past seemed to think that they had a very easy verbal way out of the necessity of thinking about these issues and of advising the rest of society on these important issues. All that was necessary was to repeat solemnly and gravely the magic phrase "pure science," and immediately, so it was believed, they had removed themselves from all environmental stimulation and influence! Certainly the psychologist should be the last scientist to rationalize his way out of the problem by postulating a sort of political-economic vacuum in which the scientist, *his theories and his work are supposed to exist*.

The group responsible for this letter was organized because its members believed that there are enough psychologists who are ready to translate some such "private feels" into behavior to justify an organized attempt to encourage this transformation. Last year, part of this same group was responsible for the circulation of a petition to the A.P.A. to recognize the existence of unemployed psychologists and to take active means to remedy such a socially undesirable situation. You may remember that the response was extremely gratifying and that the membership of the A.P.A. responded with a unanimity which betrayed a real social awareness on the part of the body of our membership. We are now ready to ask for your more active aid in organizing ourselves permanently.

<sup>5</sup> This letter was also published in full in the journal, *Psychological Exchange* (4, 1936, 226-227), under the heading "Psychologists and Present-Day Activities."

The present committee has no completed and "closed" program in mind. We want and need your help in formulating such a program. In general, we wish to establish an organization of accredited psychologists to promote specific research projects on *contemporary* psychological problems; to collect, analyze and disseminate data on the psychological consequences of our present economic, political and cultural crisis; to encourage the participation of psychologists *as psychologists* in the activities of the day. Society very definitely needs our aid. Economists, politicians, physicists, editorialists, munitions manufacturers and "philosophers" have not hesitated to advise society on problems of social motivation, the inevitability of war as "inherent in human nature" and the like. What psychologists have come forth to substantiate or refute these psychological "laws"? These are important psychological questions *per se*; that their answers may have important social implications does not make them any less so and should not frighten us away from them. There is, we believe, a definite need for an organization to encourage, promote and support (both financially and "morally") such research.

Before we can go ahead with any program, however, we must know how many other psychologists we can count on. Specifically, will you write us telling us that you are willing to help organize an agency for some such purpose? Will you include in your letter any general or specific suggestions? Will you also include an estimate of the probable attitude of your colleagues toward this work?

*Raleigh M. Drake [Westlyan College, Georgia] to Krechevsky, March 20, 1936*

I like your idea very much and see much value in it . . . The public does not have too much confidence in "psychology" now because psychologists have been so academic, impractical, theoretical [sic], and after all what have they contributed of an objective nature that the layman can observe? A committee, such as you suggest, might serve as a sieve to prevent unsound theories from reaching the public, and thereby protect all psychologists, as well as to encourage the discovery and application of psychological laws which may be important for society . . .

*Ralph R. Brown [United States Public Health Service] to Krechevsky,  
March 20, 1936*

I shall be very glad to cooperate in any possible way with your committee in its efforts to encourage, promote, and support psychological research on contemporary social problems . . . Naturally, I am quite partial to the psychologist's standpoint in these matters, but I cannot help but see that the medical man has several good reasons for his attitude. Above all, the physician takes a practical attitude toward research and is most anxious to solve those problems which are directly concerned with human welfare. Only too often, however, the psychologist—safe in the confines of a university—is engaged in what I would call "academic boogdog-

gling" – research on insignificant problems . . . Let the efforts of your committee be directed toward the promoting of a research problem to be worked out in collaboration with a medical group. This will necessitate a problem having a definite significance for human welfare . . .

Ray Willoughby [Clark University] to Krechensky, March 20, 1936

Sure, I'm with you "in principle"; but just to be ornery . . . I'm going to deny that you or anybody else, at least qua psychologists, can do a damned thing about it . . . And what research projects would you promote? Can you see anything in sight, in any direction, that you could do that would have any bearing on anything? I can't. The journals are crammed with tripe, in social as well as other fields, which no sensible person bothers to read. Suppose you "collected, analyzed and disseminated" data to your heart's content – to whom would it make the slightest difference? . . . "What psychologists have come forth to substantiate or refute these psychological 'laws'?" Well, I'll bite – what psychologists could substantiate or refute them? And how? By hollering louder than the propounders of the "laws"? Do you know anybody that knows anything at all (relevant and beyond common sense, I mean) about these alleged laws? I don't.

F. J. Adams (University of Texas) to Krechensky, March 21, 1936

Because of the claims of pseudo-psychologists with respect to advice on "Health, Wealth and Happiness"<sup>6</sup> with their five free lectures, and such, it would seem quite unwise, particularly in this region, for the A.P.A. to come out with an attempt to solve the problems of the economists, sociologists, or those of any other group of specialists. In this area, the distinction, even among "educated" individuals, between scientific and pseudo-psychologists is not very clear, and between social reformers and individuals of "pink" or darker tendencies, even less clear. The combination of these would be distinctly harmful to those attempting to preserve the status of scientific psychology and to advance its influence, in my belief.

Cabin Hall [University of Oregon] to Krechensky, March 23, 1936

Of course you can count on me for any inflation of the ego of homo psychologicus. Do we have to waive the red flag<sup>7</sup> or is this just a milk-sop, a parlor-pink

<sup>6</sup> This may have been a reference to a popular psychology magazine published monthly from 1923 to 1939, entitled *Psychology: Health, Happiness, Success*.

<sup>7</sup> A reference to communism, whereas the pink that follows in the sentence refers to a leftist view that is considered more moderate. The term "pinko" was a derogatory term for someone who had communist leanings or sympathies.

organization? . . . To be more serious however . . . Care must be taken . . . not to promise more than we can actually deliver. Just after the war some psychologists sold aptitude testing "short" and we are only now recovering from that period of exaggerated optimism [sic]. We ought to know, moreover, why some psychologists are unemployed. I am certainly in sympathy with the prospectus but I want to emphasize [sic] again that I hope this can all be done through the A.P.A. rather than through some independent organization.

Ralph White<sup>8</sup> [Wesleyan University] to Krechensky, March 23, 1936

I was delighted to find that psychologists were at last beginning to wake up, and particularly to find that you were one of the wakers . . . Suggestions for what could be done? Plenty: 1. Get some non-A.P.A. members. Nearly all of the good social psychologists aren't in the A.P.A. . . . 3. Get a representative cross-section of the unemployed in the United States and make about a hundred careful case studies, stressing infantilizing effects, rationalizations, paranoid trends, conscious explanations of the depression, and ideas about what is to be done about it . . . 5. Collect case studies of strikers who are black-listed, and their families . . . 9. Catalogue the stereotypes of the American mind. Publicize the fact that the same stereotypes are utilized by both left and right . . .

Albert T. Poffenberger [Columbia University] to Krechensky, March 23, 1936

I am heartily in favor of the ideas expressed in your circular letter. My views on the matters there discussed are expressed in my presidential address of last September before the American Psychological Association. It is my conviction that the A.P.A. should take the initiative in dealing with public questions either through a committee or through the machinery of a central office or preferably through a combination of these devices. I do not favor setting up a separate organization or an unattached or unofficial committee for purposes in mind. Such a move would, in my opinion, merely delay forcing the A.P.A. to become a more active public influence . . .

J. Stanley Gray (University of Pittsburgh) to Krechensky, March 23, 1936

Indeed I am much interested in a proposal to form an organization to promote psychological interpretations and implications for our present economic and

<sup>8</sup> Ralph K. White was an important social psychologist who made significant contributions to an understanding of the nature of war and conflict. He is considered one of the founders of the field known as peace psychology. One of his more important books is *Nobody Wanted War: Misperceptions in Vietnam and Other Wars* (1968).

political plight. I am greatly concerned with the enormous amount of "raw" data we psychologists are turning out and at the same time the poverty of interpretation of these data for use in American life. We are not making our science useful to any marked extent (except possibly in the field of education).

*William E. Walton [University of Nebraska] to Krechevsky, March 26, 1936*

I am in hearty accord with what your committee is trying to do to promote active research on contemporary psychological projects. I feel there should be several functions of such a group: 1. We should educate the public concerning the contributions which psychology can make to its immediate problems . . . 2. We should create a market for our students . . . 3. We must educate the public against psychological quackery. In order that we may do this we should campaign for legal recognition of the term psychologist and limit its use to those qualified . . .

*John Mortimer Stephens [Johns Hopkins University] to Krechevsky, March 27, 1936*

. . . I belong to that group who have considerable faith in "pure science" and whose position is so illogical that to state it (with an exclamation mark) is to refute it. I doubt if the psychological information with which I am most familiar is clearly enough understood even by psychologists to be of much practical value. Furthermore I am afraid that a pre-mature attempt to apply our hypotheses to practical affairs may discredit psychology as a science in somewhat the same way that some aspects of economic theory and political science have been discredited . . .

*Ernest R. Hilgard [Stanford University] to Krechevsky, March 30, 1936*

I wish to express my interest in the proposal of your committee that psychologists concern themselves in an organized way with regard to matters of public policy . . . I have been teaching industrial psychology for the first time this year, and I am amazed to find that our textbooks are almost unaware of the fact that labor unions exist. As though wage-incentives constitute motivational psychology in complete disregard of the social realities which labor is facing! The trouble as I see it is that in our deference to physiology and physics we have not taken seriously the social sciences . . .

*Merrill Roff [Indiana University] to Krechevsky, April 1, 1936*

Your bulletins arrived and were properly dismissed. I have talked enough about the whole thing to become rather a nuisance to some of my associates, and

since my status for next year is still indefinite, I am pulling in my horns. The thing works this way: any suggestion that psychologists take a look at the world is at once interpreted as an advocacy of "applied psychology" and dismissed summarily . . .

*James McKeen Cattell<sup>9</sup> [Editorial Office, Science magazine] to Krechevsky, April 4, 1936*

I have read your memorandum with interest and am in full sympathy with the objects of your committee. I am not convinced that psychology as a science is in a position to supply adequate guidance. There is consequently a danger that we may speak with the authority of science when the value of what we advocate depends not on expert knowledge but on general intelligence.

*George H. Estabrooks<sup>10</sup> [Colgate University] to Krechevsky, April 10, 1936*

With reference to your mimeographed sheets concerning the participation of psychologists in the contemporary political world, allow me to register my hearty dissent with approximately everything contained therein. If psychologists, as individuals, wish to make themselves politically vocal on any topic - white, red, or pink - it seems to me that is wholly up to them . . . It seems to me that, as psychologists, our duties are pretty clear cut. If any group of us wish to organize as a "Committee for the Propagation of Mild Pinkism", for goodness sake, let us organize ourselves as such and not in camouflage under the protecting skirts of the American Psychological Association.

*Robert B. MacLeod [Swarthmore College] to Krechevsky, April 14, 1936*

. . . I feel the same way as you do about the present impotence of psychology and psychologists in the contemporary social crisis and I feel very strongly that we ought to do something about it. You can count on me to cooperate in any way possible in the realization of your program. Just at present I feel myself somewhat restricted by the fact that I am not an American citizen and consequently would be chucked out of the country very quickly if I took part in any agitation. That would not interfere, however, with my contributing in any way possible to the organization of the group and to the research which it may undertake . . .

<sup>9</sup> Cattell (1860-1944) would have been, perhaps, the most distinguished of the senior psychologists at this time. See Chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> Clearly George H. Estabrooks (1895-1973) did not lean to the left in his politics. He was an authority on hypnosis and in the 1940s had associations with the FBI involving the subject of mind control.

### Epilogue

Although most of the letters received in response to the recruiting letter from Krechevsky and his organizing committee were positive, even among the supporters there were serious questions raised. Would the organization be in danger of promising more than it could deliver? Should the job of social action be the responsibility of the APA instead of some other organization? Would the public take psychology and the social sciences seriously? Is the science of psychology really adequate to the task of curing social ills? Will a focus on psychology in the service of social issues weaken the scientific standing of "pure" psychology? Should SPSSI seek affiliation with the APA or remain independent of it?

At the same time, the supporters felt that the time had come (or was overdue) when psychologists should use their science to speak to social and political concerns. Some believed that SPSSI should work to increase public awareness of psychology, and educate the public about scientific psychology versus the "quackery" of the pseudo-psychologies. One writer asked that SPSSI work to gain legal recognition of the term "psychologist," which would have meant certification (something that would have to happen by law in each of the states). Certification would restrict the use of the term "psychologist" to individuals with certain educational and training experiences as defined by each of the states.<sup>11</sup>

SPSSI proved largely true to its aims as set out in its initial bylaws. In a review of SPSSI's first 20 years, David Krech (formerly Krechevsky) and Dorwin Cartwright (1956) described the principal functions of the society:

- (1) encouraging research on social issues; (2) encouraging the application in social practice of scientific knowledge in psychology and the social sciences; (3) giving moral and other support to individuals who take risks by undertaking or interpreting research on social issues; (4) acting as a kind of social conscience for psychologists, encouraging them in actions in which the entire psychological community is likely to be concerned. (p. 471)

They do not mention a focus on expanding the employment opportunities for psychologists. In truth, by 1956, there were few psychologists who had been able to find a job interpreting or applying psychological science to social problems. Thus it would have been difficult to tout that as a success, whereas SPSSI could point to important contributions in each of the four areas listed above. Nowhere would that have been more evident than the job that SPSSI did in assisting the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) legal

<sup>11</sup> Certification (which defines a psychologist) and licensure laws (which define what psychologists can do) began in the 1940s, with Connecticut being the first state to license psychologists in 1945 and Missouri being the last of the 50 states to pass a psychology licensure law in 1977. These laws were achieved largely through the work of the state psychological associations rather than the work of SPSSI.

defense team, headed by Thurgood Marshall, in preparing what became known as the social science brief, filed in the Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*. That historic document, prepared chiefly by three SPSSI members – Kenneth B. Clark,<sup>12</sup> Stuart Cook, and Isidor Chein – argued that psychological and sociological research showed that African-American children were psychologically damaged as a result of legally mandated segregation in the schools and other parts of society. In this case, the NAACP sought to overturn an earlier Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which established the "separate but equal" doctrine that led to legal segregation in the schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia. On May 17, 1954, in a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional and, in a footnote to its decision, cited psychological and sociological research (much of it by SPSSI members) that had played an important role in influencing the Court's decision (see Jackson, 2001; Kluger, 1975). To cite psychological evidence in a Supreme Court decision, arguably the most important court decision in the twentieth century, was certainly validation for psychology as a science, and a great reward for an organization that was at the time less than 20 years old. The story of psychologists' involvement in the *Brown v. Board* decision is told in Chapter 16.

SPSSI continues today, seventy years old, as an organization still true to its original commitment to bring the science of psychology to bear on the social problems that confront the world. Divorce, child abuse, pornography, international conflict and war, racism, labor-management conflicts, legal justice, propaganda, social class, children's rights, and sexism are just some of the many subjects that SPSSI members have investigated. The contributions to an understanding of those topics have been substantial.

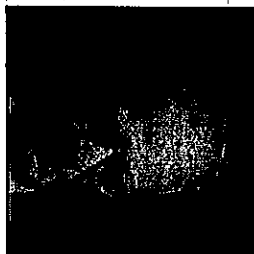
As for David Krech and Ross Stagner, the organizers of the 1936 meeting out of which SPSSI grew, they did well too. Krech spent most of his career at the University of California-Berkeley, first as a social psychologist and then working in the field of behavioral neuroscience, specifically on the chemistry of the brain important for learning. Ross Stagner, a long-time faculty member at Wayne State University, became a famous industrial-organizational psychologist, strongly identified with the concerns of labor in labor-management relations. Given his lifelong SPSSI membership, perhaps that was to be expected. Both lived long enough to see the many successes of the socially active organization they had founded.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Bancroft Clark (1914–2005) and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark (1917–1983), conducted a series of studies in the late 1930s that were used in the segregation court cases in the 1950s, including *Brown v. Board*, to illustrate the negative impact of segregation on black children. Kenneth Clark is the only African American ever elected President of the APA, a post he held in 1971. For information about the Clarks, see Guthrie, 1990; Philogene, 2004; and Chapter 16 of this book.

## Suggested Readings

- Finson, L. J. (1976). Unemployment, politics, and the history of organized psychology. *American Psychologist*, 31, 747-755.
- A history of the founding of two organizations, SPSSI and the Psychologists' League, both of which sought to force the APA to increase employment opportunities for psychologists.
- Finson, L. J. (1979). An aspect of the early history of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues: Psychologists and labor. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 29-37.
- Focuses principally on SPSSI's involvement with labor and trade unions during the Great Depression.
- Harris, B. (1980). The FBI's files on APA and SPSSI: Description and implications. *American Psychologist*, 35, 1141-1144.
- A description of the FBI files on SPSSI, obtained by Harris in the late 1970s through the Freedom of Information Act.
- Krech, D., & Cartwright, D. (1956). On SPSSI's first twenty years. *American Psychologist*, 11, 470-473.
- A history of the founding and first twenty years of SPSSI whose senior author was the person most responsible for the establishment of the society.
- Nicholson, I. (1997). The politics of scientific social reform, 1936-1960: Goodwin Watson and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 33, 39-60.
- Watson helped found SPSSI and was elected its first chair in 1937 after it was a formal organization. This fascinating article describes the transformation of Watson from his 1930s position of advocating that psychologists operate from a specific political framework (i.e., leftist) to calling for psychologists to provide expertise in a value-free way.
- The transforming event for Watson occurred in World War II when his activities caused him to be accused of affiliating with communists.
- Sargent, S. S., & Harris, B. (1986). Academic freedom, civil liberties, and SPSSI. *Journal of Social Issues*, 42 (1), 43-67.
- A historical treatment of SPSSI's involvement in issues of academic and intellectual freedom from 1936 through 1970. Cases reviewed include those of David Krech, Goodwin Watson, and Gardner Murphy.
- Stagner, R. (1986). Reminiscences about the founding of SPSSI. *Journal of Social Issues*, 42 (1), 35-42.
- A history of the founding of SPSSI by another of the two most significant principals.
- Note:* For further information on the history of SPSSI see two special issues of the *Journal of Social Issues*, 1986, 42 (3) and 42 (4).

## CHAPTER 15



B. F. Skinner  
Archives of the History of American  
Psychology/University of Akron



Eve Skinner playing with daughter Deborah  
in the baby tender, 1945  
(B. F. Skinner Foundation)

## B. F. Skinner's Heir Conditioner

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) was perhaps the most important psychologist of the twentieth century and certainly one of the scientists best known to the American public (Rutherford, 2000). Among his many inventions was a chamber for studying operant behavior, principally in rats and pigeons. Research in those chambers led to a number of important discoveries, especially the ways that various schedules of reinforcement differentially affected behavior. The chamber, of course, became known as the Skinner box. Skinner built other boxes as well, including one he called the "baby tender" which he used for his younger daughter Deborah, born in 1944. Deborah Skinner (Buzan) would grow up known as the "baby reared in a box."

One can imagine the tragic consequences of such child rearing. Some reports said that Deborah was later committed for many years to a mental institution where she died. Others said that she committed suicide. Still others reported that she brought a lawsuit against her famous father for child abuse. Alas, all of these horrible but interesting outcomes are false, although they are all part of the urban legends of "psychology experiments gone awry." Deborah Skinner Buzan is now in her sixties and has led a happy life and enjoyed success as an artist. But she did spend part of the first few years of her life in a device designed and built by