Constructing a Women's History of Psychology*

Elizabeth Scarborough
Professor Emerita, Indiana University South Bend

To date most of our efforts to "tell women's lives" have focused on biography and autobiography. There are other ways of considering women in the history of psychology, of course. But our primary interest, not unusual for psychologists, has been in the lived experiences of the women in psychology's history. Given this interest in recovering women's experiences and adding them to the history of our field, what is now available for constructing the history of women in psychology based upon their life stories? As for book-length biographies of North American women, there is none written by an historian, although Leta Stetter Hollingworth, Naomi Norsworthy, and Lillien Jane Martin have been subjects of such works. Fortunately, there are shorter biographical studies available in a number of sources. The most comprehensive of these is O'Connell and Russo's 1990 *Women in Psychology: A Bio-bibliographic Sourcebook*, which features studies of 36 women. Some of psychology's early women are included in well-known reference works, such as *Notable American Women* and *American National Biography*, and several are represented in the series sponsored by Division 1 entitled *Portraits of Pioneers in Psychology*. Also available is Scarborough and Furumoto's 1987 collective biography of the first 25 American women psychologists, *Untold Lives: The First Generation of American Women Psychologists*.

For autobiography, the currently available resources are more numerous, although there is only one monographic length work. For shorter autobiographies, there are three multi-volume series. The long-running *A History of Psychology in Autobiography* and Krawiec's *The*

Psychologists each include a few women. The three volumes of *Models of Achievement: Reflections of Eminent Women in Psychology* provide a rich collection.

However, despite these resources, the gender imbalance in the current availability of full-length biographies of women psychologists raises questions: Was it that women simply did not achieve adequate prominence so as to rank with men? Was that because they did not do remarkable work and make noteworthy contributions? And if so, why was it that they did not achieve and earn honors commensurate with their numbers? Granted, women have tended to cluster in certain sub-fields, and have been more likely to enter the applied/professional fields as opposed to academic/scientific ones; applied work has been less respected by psychologists and less considered by historians. But a number of the men who have received biographic attention were themselves dedicated to applied work. So might it be that scholars, editors, and chroniclers have simply failed to consider women - either as an oversight or by deliberate decisions to exclude them? Whichever, this situation needs to be corrected! The details of women's lives need to be preserved in archival collections and through careful and inclusive oral history so that future biographers have adequate information to construct the history of women in psychology.

The women now included in collections of autobiographies represent a select subset of their cohorts in psychology. They are the eminent, the recognized, the honored. We might even call them deviants or outliers. We do well to applaud and appreciate them. But they constitute only a small subset of those women and men who sought and gained necessary training for entering psychology in the first half of the 20th century. What about the experience and history of the greater number of women in psychology--those who lived unexceptional careers? Only by learning about the less notable, those who dropped out and those who converted their

professional tools to labor in non-psychology settings, will we gain an understanding of the range of experiences encountered by our earliest women.

But where will this history take us? So far in the development of this history, we have documented the lack of suitable recognition of women's contributions, but we have not provided much in the way of explanation or interpretation. I submit that if we are to construct a fully-fledged women's history of psychology, we need more than a record of women's life experiences. We need now to determine women's effect on the field. When and how did women's changing status affect the social values and operations of psychology, the science as well as the professional discipline with its organizational and political components? Can we identify a distinct "women's culture" within psychology, perhaps cutting across its sub-fields? If so, when and how did it emerge? Consider this: during psychology's first 80 years, two women held the presidency of the APA, but in the last 30 years, eight women have been elected. How did that happen? And what might be the effect of the women's terms as APA president? How is it that later women, unlike their predecessors, came to invest so heavily in women's issues and changing women's status? What difference have they made? How might Division 35 and AWP have changed in focus and strategy since their foundings?

So, more than just a "for-the-record" reporting, we now need interpretation and analysis. As Eleanor Gibson wrote in her 1980 autobiography, "It is easy to collect material and summarize, but thinking is hard." And it is just that "hard thinking" that might well engage us now as we write a women's history of psychology. We've come a long way, to be sure, but there are still more questions. There is much yet to explore, much to ponder, and much to understand.

*Originally published in The Feminist Psychologist, Newsletter of the Society for the Psychology of Women, Division 35 of the American Psychological Association, Volume 32, Number 1, Winter, 2005, p. 6. Appearing with permission of the author.

The article is based on Dr. Scarborough's Mary Whiton Calkins Lecture, delivered at the 112th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, HI, 2004.