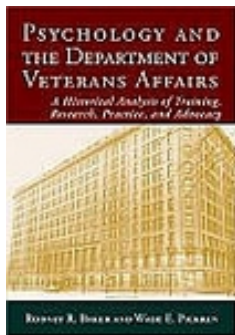



War, Government, and the Development of Professional Psychology: A History Worth Telling

A review of



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Psychology and the Department of Veterans Affairs: A Historical Analysis of Training, Research, Practice, and Advocacy

by Rodney R. Baker and Wade E. Pickren

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007. 184 pp. ISBN 978-1-

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Reviewed by

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History and Systems of Psychology was the least popular class among the required courses in my graduate program. The lectures and readings about past theorists, research, and events generated about as much excitement as paying tuition. Although we could acknowledge that these early elements of psychology were foundational to the field, they seemed to offer little of real value to budding professionals seeking to learn about the latest innovations and developments. Like many practicing psychologists, I continue to

focus much of my daily attention on current developments and insights in the field, rather than reviewing the past. So when I initially read the title of this book, my first reaction was not one of flushed excitement. What could I find of relevance in this historical work, particularly a history of such a specialized line of practice as psychology in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)?

The authors readily acknowledge that the work is narrowly focused. They state early that their goal is to write a historical resource volume on psychology and the VA. This is the second volume in a series of books examining the interplay between government and the profession of psychology; the first focused on psychology and the National Institute of Mental Health (Pickren & Schneider, 2005). The authors state that the book is written for readers interested in the way that government affects professional fields like psychology. The appropriate limits of government action are currently a lively topic of debate, and this volume gives clear evidence of how the U.S. government played an important role in the development of the fields of psychology and mental health care. The clearest evidence of this role is noted in the authors' account of events directly following the end of World War II (WWII). Recognizing that the large cohort of returning WWII veterans would need mental health care, the VA sought to hire 500 new psychologists with doctoral degrees at a time when only about 650 psychologists were practicing in the entire United States. By documenting the successful steps taken by the VA to develop this workforce, and the way their efforts changed the field of psychological practice, training, and credentialing, the authors offer a compelling example of the positive contributions government has made to our profession and the broader field of mental health care.

Given the focus on the VA and health care for veterans, this work also offers valuable insight into the ways in which wars influence the marketplace. WWII resulted in a tidal wave of returning veterans who needed mental health services, as well as a populace that felt obligated to ensure that the needs of that cohort were met. Given the current social

and political ambivalence toward change in health care funding, it is worth noting how that war led to a dramatic change in social priorities, which was reflected in changes in funding and practice. The broader impact of war is a very current topic of interest. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the Global War on Terrorism, have had wide-ranging effects on mental health and mental health care, including a renewed commitment to clinical care and practice for veterans, greater recognition of the link between traumatic experience and mental illness, and expanded opportunities for psychologists to develop new services.

The tone of this book is different than in many histories. The authors state that one of the challenges they faced was the limited availability of source documents relevant to their topic, particularly from the period from 1945 to 1955. Many of the written documents sought were internal VA publications that had apparently been lost or were not available to the authors. In order to fill in gaps in key information, the authors relied heavily on interviews with more than 30 "key psychology leaders," most of whom appear to have been VA employees. This strategy is apparent in the text and contributes to the reader's sense that he or she is reading an oral history. Many of the chapters read like installments of an account by an older VA psychologist telling a younger VA psychologist about his or her organizational ancestry. Although some readers may feel uncomfortable with such a format, I found that it transforms what could be a dry narrative into a more personal story involving important relationships, struggles, and meanings.

The role that the authors have played in VA psychology, particularly the role by Rodney Baker in VA psychology administration, contributes to this personal quality. For example, the authors document their central role in a number of advocacy activities for VA psychology, such as the collection of workload data to protect psychologists from proposed outsourcing in 1994. This is clearly a telling of the story of VA psychology by people who

have lived it and who feel passionate about it. This firsthand perspective will be most helpful to readers who are VA psychologists, particularly those relatively new to the VA. For this audience, the book provides the story of how the organization came to be where it is. Issues currently facing VA psychologists, such as pay status, administrative organization, and the latest professional turf wars, become clearer through the authors' recounting of the antecedents of these contemporary challenges. Psychologists who are new to the VA, as well as mental health advocates and administrators, would also be wise to review these accounts of past successes and failures to gain insights for developing strategies for future success.

The personal quality of this history is a two-edged sword. Although it extends the available history and imbues it with a firsthand perspective, it raises questions about the objectivity of the conclusions. Readers looking for a less subjective accounting of the events of VA psychology may find themselves trying to read between the lines. For example, when the authors describe how they were involved in collecting data needed to defend psychologists from planned staffing cuts threatening the jobs of 50 percent of VA psychologists, the objective reader will clearly recognize the account of an invested advocate instead of an objective historian. The input of those seeking the staffing cuts was not likely sought in the development of the book, and the framing of the account would likely be different from a less invested perspective.

Although the authors state that they sought to write a history of the period from 1946 through 1988, they actually provide substantial information up to 2005. In fact, the account of activity in the VA over the past 10 years represents a valuable bonus for many readers. As has been noted by a number of national publications, the VA health care system has emerged as a leader in the provision of high-quality services, including mental health services. The authors' account of the efforts by VA psychologists to develop and

coordinate recovery-oriented psychosocial rehabilitation services, informed by active intervention-oriented research programs, provides key clues to the recent success of the VA.

Having admitted that I am a reluctant student of the history of psychology, I now feel compelled to admit that Baker and Pickren have accomplished what they sought to do. They have written a well-crafted historical resource in an area in which little written material is available. More important, they have produced a very readable, and at times compelling, history of one of the key elements in the development of professional psychology in the United States, and the role the federal government played in it. Most important for me, as a VA psychologist, I gained a valued sense of how my work fits into, and has benefited from, the contributions of those who have gone before me. Surprisingly, this book is both relevant to my current work and provides insights into where that work might be heading in the future. Although I am not ready to go back and reread my History and Systems texts, I am ready to recommend this book to fellow psychologists, and have already done so.

Reference

- Pickren, W. E., & Schneider, S. F. (Eds.). (2005). *Psychology and the National Institute of Mental Health: A historical analysis of science, practice, and policy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
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