

# Discovering Lightner Witmer: A Forgotten Hero of Psychology

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## Abstract

*Lightner Witmer is considered to be the father of clinical psychology founded the first clinical psychology laboratory, and assisted in the development of special education, school psychology, and applied psychology. However, Witmer has been somewhat erased from psychology textbooks. The author examines the life and work of Lightner Witmer so as to find a reason for his erasure. Whether it be his argumentative means of communication, his comparison of chimpanzees to children, or the lack of appreciation for his ideas and theories, it seems clear that Lightner Witmer is a forgotten hero of psychology.*

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The goals for this paper are to discover Lightner Witmer as a person and a psychologist and to uncover why he has been forgotten by many. This may be a difficult task for Witmer was a very private person who did not leave an abundance of letters, autobiographical notes, or other memorabilia to help see him clearly (McReynolds, 1997). Witmer has been known for his great contributions to the field of clinical psychology and applying the knowledge of psychology to helping other people— especially children. He founded the first clinical psychology laboratory in the United States at the University of Pennsylvania and was the first professional to use the term “clinical psychology”. He assisted many children in overcoming what he referred to as “defects” in his laboratory. Although Witmer was originally on the more hereditarian side of the heredity-environment controversy, later in life he came to be one of the first to swim against the hereditarian tide (McReynolds, 1997a). Using this latter approach, Witmer defined defects as “not a disease, nor is it necessarily the result of a defect in the brain. Rather it is a mental status, a stage of mental development” (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 158). Especially in the latter of Witmer’s career, there was a strong emphasis on the environmental and socioeconomic role in relation to the development of a child’s capacity. In addition to clinical psychology, he made great advancements in the field of school psychology and special education. He guided psychologists, and other professionals, in the necessary steps to aid children in overcoming learning disabilities.

While Witmer made many great contributions to the fields of psychology and education he has been

somewhat historically erased. The American Psychological Association (APA) website does not have his obituary posted among the many other great psychologists. The fact that he contributed so much to a variety of fields yet has been nearly erased from psychology textbooks and history is intriguing. What was it about Lightner Witmer or his work that has caused him to be shunned in the realm of psychology? Could his work have been ahead of his time? Was there some political agenda that conflicted with the goals of his research? Throughout my research of Lightner Witmer and his work, I theorize that his research and ideas were ahead of his time. He was a pioneer in the field of clinical psychology and helping others. Though others may have felt that psychology was not meant as an instrument to guide people in overcoming their defects, Witmer pressed through the criticism and would not let his dream die. Witmer may not have realized the consequences of his actions at the time, but they are very obvious today— no recognition.

## Childhood

Lightner Witmer was born June 28, 1867 (McReynolds, 1997a), which is historically just a few years after the American Civil War. As a young boy, Witmer grew up as part of the post-war generation. This generation was living in a plethora of emotion from the war— there was an atmosphere of relief, worry, and hope. Witmer was born in Philadelphia which was surrounded by what are now historical events, such as the battle of Gettysburg and the famous address made by Lincoln. Philadelphians are a proud group that comes from a long history which still remains today (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer most likely had such pride instilled; not only as a Philadelphian, but later in his career as a psychologist. This may have been what led to Witmer’s demise. His pride of his work may have overpowered the social etiquette that had been expected of psychologists in his day. In addition, the great amount of hope that he was raised with may have contributed to his later theory of applying psychology to helping others. Since Witmer was a young boy he had hoped of a better world. In the years after the war there was a strong feeling of justice and

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idealism throughout the country and the town in which he was raised. The pride, optimism of a better world, and idealistic hope that surrounded Witmer characterized his later adult life. We see this in Witmer's work as he hopes for a better world for children—one in which they can overcome their defects and continue their education.

### **Education and Family**

Education was highly valued among the Witmer family. Lightner Witmer's father, David Witmer, was a pharmacist; education was not a novel idea within the Witmer household. However, few historical facts are known about his mother, Katherine (McReynolds, 1997a). This is unfortunate since at this time period the mother had the most influence on children's values and everyday lifestyle. Since the mother was the parent to stay at home, I speculate that the Witmer children received their educational aspirations from their father. The father was a graduate of college, while their mother instilled other aspects such as manners, honesty, and respect of authority. For instance, as a young boy, Witmer's parents sent him to a dance school in order to learn the proper social graces (McReynolds, 1997a). I further speculate Mrs. Witmer was also influential and supportive in her children's educational aspirations considering she most likely spent the majority of her day looking after the children and assuring that homework was completed.

David and Katherine Witmer had a total of four children. The eldest, Lightner Witmer, was originally recorded as David L. Witmer Jr. Since childhood, he had always been referred to as Lightner. Witmer changed his name legally to Lightner, but not until the age of 50. The second child was named Albert Ferree, the third child was named Lilly Evelyn, and the last of the Witmer family to be born was Paul DeLancey. All of the Witmer children earned higher education degrees and professional careers (McReynolds, 1997a). From this, it is obvious that the Witmer family highly valued education. The parents persisted on having their children earn an education.

All of the Witmer children attended the top schools in Philadelphia. Albert Ferree attended the University of Pennsylvania where he earned his doctorate in physiology (McReynolds, 1997a). Later, in 1897, Ferree joined Witmer on the University of Pennsylvania staff as the teacher of physiological psychology (McReynolds, 1997a). Six years passed, and Ferree left University of Pennsylvania for the neurologist position at the Hospital for Ruptured and Crippled in New York City (McReynolds, 1997a). Lilly Evelyn also attended the University of Pennsylvania within the biology department where she obtained her BS. She furthered her education by attending the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania (McReynolds, 1997a). Upon completing

her medical training and advanced study, Lilly took an opportunity to study bacteriology in Berlin (McReynolds, 1997a). Paul, the youngest, was the only one not to attend the University of Pennsylvania but later earned a doctoral degree in pharmacy with the intention of continuing his father's line of work (McReynolds, 1997a). In 1905, all four Witmer children held doctorate degrees (McReynolds, 1997a). Even today it would be difficult for a family to produce such an education. In 1905, this feat must have been incredible. The fact that all four children continued their education until completion of a doctoral degree is evidence of the importance and emphasis on education that must have been stressed by the Witmer parents.

### ***Witmer's Education***

Witmer attended the Episcopal Academy of Philadelphia for his college preparatory work. The Episcopal Academy of Philadelphia was one of the most prestigious schools both socially and academically. The fact that Witmer attended such a school speaks volumes to the emphasis that was placed on education by his parents. The Witmer family was neither of nobility nor money, which lends support to the hard work that both Lightner Witmer and his parents must have done in order to ensure his acceptance into the Episcopal Academy of Philadelphia. At the age of 17, Witmer finished his work at the Academy and in the fall of 1884 Lightner enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania (McReynolds, 1997a).

### ***College years.***

Witmer originally had no knowledge in regards to the field of psychology; the University of Pennsylvania had no such department as of yet. At this time, psychology was a new field and unknown. Upon entering the University of Pennsylvania Witmer was an Art major; however, after just two years he transferred to Finance and Economy. After four years, Witmer graduated at the age of twenty-one with his BA degree (McReynolds, 1997a). After graduating it seems as if Witmer was not sure exactly what to do with his degree and where his life was headed. Although the Witmer family valued education so highly, Witmer chose not to immediately attend graduate school. Rather, he took a position teaching English and History at the Rugby Academy for boys (McReynolds, 1997a). There may have been many reasons why Witmer chose to teach rather than to further his education. He may have felt that he had finished his education, but that seems unlikely since his family valued education so dearly. It is possible that Witmer decided he should gain teaching experience as a means to determine his future career. Most likely, however, he needed to work for financial reasons. Witmer worked at the Rugby Academy for boys for a total of two years. During his last year teaching, Witmer made the decision to enter into graduate school at University of Pennsylvania (McReynolds, 1997a). The fact that Witmer continued to teach while attending graduate school, which it is very

tiring and difficult to work while completing coursework, implies that Witmer was working solely out of financial need.

### **Graduate school.**

Witmer began his graduate coursework in the fall of 1889 in the department of philosophy. However, shortly after it began he changed departments to political science (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer changed his course of study in both his undergraduate and graduate levels of study. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Witmer was unable to find a field that suited him best. He seemed to have many interests in life, but was not able to find a major that fit his unspoken goals in life. Little did Witmer know that the field he was searching for was just beginning at the University of Pennsylvania.

As a student of philosophy, and then political science, Witmer paid little attention to the new faculty member that the University had hired his first semester— James McKeen Cattell. Cattell immediately began work to open a laboratory on the University campus. This was a laboratory of experimental psychology which focused on individual differences among persons (McReynolds, 1997a). Through some coercion from the professors in June of 1890, Witmer took an assistantship under Cattell and changed his major, yet again, to experimental psychology. Witmer was one of four graduate students in the experimental psychology program and was assigned to collect data on individual differences in reaction time using all classes of persons as subjects (McReynolds, 1997a).

Witmer thrived in this new and upcoming field of experimental psychology. He excelled in his courses, and his in-depth understanding of the process to conducting experiments can be seen in his first book. Witmer's (1902) book outlined and modeled experiments to their minute detail. He explained the processes necessary to conduct valid and reliable experiments, the necessary information in an experimental write up, and how to conduct such experiments among students in an academic setting. Witmer's (1902) book can be viewed, not as a book, but rather as a manual to students and professors on the appropriate manner in which experimental psychology should be conducted.

### **A trip to Germany.**

While Witmer was flourishing in the new field of psychology under the direction of Cattell, in June of 1891— just a year after Witmer began his assistantship— Cattell left the University of Pennsylvania for a teaching position at Columbia University (McReynolds, 1997a). Cattell, who was the sole professor of psychology, left his graduate students and his laboratory in its infancy. Rather than change majors, which he had been known to do, Witmer surprisingly decided to stay with the program and finish it through. Since Witmer had been so fickle with his

major in the past, it stands to reason that he actually enjoyed and found a passion for psychology. However, a new problem arose for Witmer, as there was no professor of psychology. Cattell, most likely through guilt of abandoning his former students, aided Witmer in obtaining a graduate assistant position with Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Germany. Cattell had previously worked with Wundt, so his recommendation may have been instrumental to Witmer being awarded such an honor as to study with Wundt (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer showed no previous interest in leaving Pennsylvania before this graduate assistant position was offered. He saw it as an excellent, and probably once in a lifetime, opportunity to further his education and work with such an influential person in psychology. Again, we see the emphasis of education that was placed on Witmer as a young boy being fulfilled and flourishing.

Witmer left for Germany in February of 1891 to study under Wilhelm Wundt. Unfortunately, records of his stay there are scarce (McReynolds, 1997a). There seems to have been no personal letters or correspondence between Witmer and any colleagues for the entire duration of his stay in Leipzig. Although Witmer and Wundt received each other well, they had their share of disputes. For instance, there was a great disagreement between Witmer and Wundt in regards to Witmer's dissertation. Witmer wanted to continue the work that he had begun with Cattell on individual differences. However, Wundt did not see the importance of this. Rather, he urged Witmer to study the aesthetic value of different visual forms (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer obeyed his mentor's instructions and completed his dissertation on the aesthetic volume of visual forms. Although Witmer completed his graduate coursework and left Germany after one year, he did not receive his formal doctoral diploma until the 29<sup>th</sup> of March in 1893. At the end of 1892, Witmer became concerned that his dissertation had not been published, as had been planned, and that he had not received his doctoral diploma. Only after desperate personal correspondence with Wundt about this matter did he finally receive his diploma (McReynolds, 1997a). Perhaps Wundt held back the release of Witmer's diploma due to their disagreement, or perhaps, this was a new side of Witmer revealed— self conscious, self-doubting, and unsure of himself.

### **Witmer as a Professor**

At the age of twenty-five, in April of 1892, Witmer returned to the University of Pennsylvania and oversaw the work in psychology. Since Cattell had left there was no one to hold the position of psychology professor (University of Pennsylvania, 1892). Although there is little information on Witmer's research for a few years after his return, in 1894 Witmer began teaching his first courses on the study of child psychology. By today's standards Witmer was by no means an expert in such subjects. However, the University must have considered

him fit to teach courses of this nature due to the developmental, educational, and psychology courses taken in Germany. In addition to his regular teaching schedule, Witmer became active in the University's special program to provide continued education for local public school teachers. There, he developed a close relationship with George Twitmeyer, the principle of the Honesdale, PA school system (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer's participation in these extra courses appears to be the catalyst for the origins of his psychological clinic that would soon develop.

In general, Witmer was remembered as a complex person. As a teacher, he was quite formal in his classes but informal in the clinic (McReynolds, 1997b). Frances Holsopple (later Parsons), a graduate student of Witmer's recalled his disposition while in the clinic. "He was always careful never to talk over the head of a subject, and he conducted very good interviews with parents" (McReynolds, 1996, p. 67). However, some days were quite different. Genevieve Murphy, a teacher-therapist at the clinic, recalled that Witmer was "typically genial and pleasant, but was sometimes moody, and could be scathing in his criticism when things were not done right" (McReynolds, 1996, p. 69). From recollections of former students and employees, and evidence to come, the fact that things were to be done Witmer's way is evident. For instance, he placed specific students in charge of the temperature in his classroom. Witmer insisted that his classroom be kept precisely at 68 degrees (McReynolds, 1997a; McReynolds, 1997b).

### ***Applying psychology.***

Witmer, ever since childhood, had been an individual who knew what he believed in. At this time, tremendous psychological interest was in hypnosis, hysteria, dissociation, notions of the subconscious, the unconscious and automatic processes. These themes did not appeal to Witmer (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer addressed the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1896 with an article that some consider pivotal to Witmer's future work, which was published in 1897 in *The Psychological Review*. "The Organization of Practical work in Psychology" was a crucial statement made by Witmer that informed his colleagues of his views and hopes of psychology. Witmer made clear his intention of applying psychology to humans especially to better children in their academia (Witmer, 1897). Although this may seem an obvious application to many today, it was a novel idea to professionals in the late eighteen-hundreds.

Witmer's (1897) intentions were quite simple. He had devised a structured plan for applying psychology to helping others and making psychology useful. He stated that departments should have close involvement with classes and grades of children in order to conduct physical and mental tests. In addition, a department of psychology needed to be equipped with specimens and

apparatus' used, outside facilities for defective children needed to be in agreement with the psychology department, and instruction in psychology should be given to teachers as well as psychologists. There is some controversy over how well his 1897 address was received. According to widely accepted lore, his address was poorly received, with the only reaction to his presentation being a few raised eyebrows. This recollection came from Dr. Joseph Collins, a well-known neurologist of the time. However, Collins was not in attendance at the 1896 meeting (McReynolds, 1997a). Perhaps Collins recounted the statements made by others. Regardless, the overall response to Witmer's career makes this alleged response seem plausible. Here again, we witness psychologists who are not ready for the ideas of Witmer. They are not ready for organization, application, and improving performance of others. Rather, it appears as though they are satisfied with the methods of introspection.

### ***Witmer Attacks***

#### ***American Psychological Association.***

In addition to this innovative proposal made by Witmer, another pivotal motion was made at the 1896 APA meeting by certain colleagues, who will later be known as the experimentalists. They motioned that the APA should not include philosophical psychology. Witmer specifically offered three motions: the first being that APA should only accept psychological papers; the second that there should be a separate American Philosophical Association for philosophical psychology. Witmer's third and final motion was that election membership be more selective (McReynolds, 1997a). These motions proposed by Witmer, and those later to be known as the experimentalists, were the beginning to a division in the psychology community. Such proposals appear to be an attempt at defining and separating psychology as its own profession. The fact that Witmer was the one to speak out and make such proposals to his colleagues speaks volumes to his character. Such an event shows that he was a headstrong individual who stood for what he believed. We will see this courage to speak out against his colleagues for what he believed to be true throughout his career. Although Witmer made specific points and a course of action in which the APA should make psychology separate from philosophy, no formal action was taken. However, at the next convention more stringent membership requirements were adopted but not to the satisfaction of Witmer (McReynolds, 1997a).

#### ***Non-experimentalists.***

In response to his own dissatisfaction with the APA's response to his proposal, Witmer wrote to G. Stanley Hall to propose the formation of a new society exclusively for experimental psychologists. Hall, at this time, was the president of the American Psychological Association. Unfortunately, Witmer's letter did not survive. Rather, a letter from Hall to Edward B. Titchener dated, March

1898, recounted Witmer's original letter to Hall. Hall wrote to Titchener, "A line from Witmer says that he wants to join you, me, and others in forming a new psychological organization which shall put the lab on a proper basis and exclude half-breeds and extremists. Do you want to consider it?" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 88). At this time, the group that Witmer proposed did not materialize due to Titchener's opposition for fear of dividing psychology in its new state. Although Witmer's new organization did not materialize at this time, this letter speaks volumes to his character. Since the original letter did not survive, it cannot be determined if Hall was quoting Witmer, or if he actually considered non-experimental psychologists to be half-breeds. Yet even if it was not a direct quote, the implication that Witmer devalued non-experimental psychologists is clearly visible. Contradictorily, Witmer still highly valued experimental psychology even though his goal for psychology was application. There appears to be somewhat of a dueling-Witmer: Witmer the experimental psychologist and Witmer the clinical psychologist. While Witmer was attempting to gain ground in the area of clinical psychology he was still an experimentalist at heart. Witmer may have been toying with the idea of making psychology practical, as well as scientific and applied.

### **Women.**

As previously mentioned, Witmer's proposition to Hall for the formation of a society for experimental psychologists was turned down by Titchener. However, in 1904 Witmer's proposal was reconsidered. Titchener decided to drop out of the American Psychological Association due to their refusal to censure or expel E.W. Scripture for plagiarism (McReynolds, 1997a). After the APA refused to expel Scripture, Titchener decided to leave the APA, and reconsidered Witmer's original proposal of an experimental society. Titchener corresponded with Witmer and informed him that it was essential they have a separate experimental society. At first, Witmer was hesitant—probably due to Titchener's opposition to his idea earlier. After some thought, Witmer accepted Titchener's proposal. In a letter to Titchener, Witmer expressed his enthusiasm for the formation of such a society. At the same time, we get a glimpse into the personal attitude of Witmer towards women. "I think that the presence of women in the organization adds greatly to this danger, owing to the personal attitude which they usually take even in scientific discussions" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 110). The rest of the letter showed that Witmer hoped that this new society will be only for men. Witmer's words implied that women are too emotional even during discussions of scientific topics, and that women will hinder the chance to have appropriate and meaningful scientific discussions.

It is a common belief that Titchener was the first experimentalist to oppose women. However, Witmer's

letters imply that he may have been the originator of the proposal to exclude women. In his letter to Titchener, Witmer wrote "I am quite positive in my objection to inviting women" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 110). Witmer's words implied that Titchener was actually questioning his proposal of excluding women. Contrary to popular belief, Witmer may have persuaded Titchener toward the exclusion of women rather than it being solely Titchener's idea. This fact alone would make Witmer unpopular among the female psychologists, and so we find another reason to strike Witmer from psychology's history. Regardless of the popularity of Witmer's opposition to women joining the experimentalists may have been, the cultural context must be considered. In the early 1900's, women were still not publicly recognized as scientists. In addition, during informal gatherings men and women tended to congregate amongst their own gender. Witmer's mindset, along with other experimentalists of the time, may have been compartmentalized in regards to gender based on cultural norms.

To have been so adamantly against the inclusion of women seems out of character for Witmer. In 1904, he married Emma Repplier and had numerous female graduate students working for him (McReynolds, 1997a). It was not until 1920, that there was a public change in Witmer's attitude toward women. In his later years, he was apparently "on the lookout for good women candidates for training" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 222). In addition, he employed numerous females at his clinic (both students and public school teachers) and appointed Elizabeth O'Conner as the manager of his clinic. She held this position until Witmer's death. Upon his passing, he left in his will to her the name of the school, the right to operate the school, and all of the equipment at the school (McReynolds, 1997a). It is clear from these later gestures in life that he was a flexible man that was able to see his errors at times. He took note of the excellent work that female students were producing, and thus changed his attitude towards women.

### **Psychology as a discipline.**

Despite supposed negative feedback from the APA meeting in 1896, Witmer opened his laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania with the intention of helping children with mental defects. In 1907, Witmer published his second most pivotal article in relation to his clinical psychology laboratory. "Clinical Psychology" provided a personal account of the events leading up to his desire to open such a laboratory and the specific procedures of his laboratory (Witmer, 1907). In addition, he provided an accurate definition of the terminology "clinical psychology" which was first introduced in this publication.

While the term 'clinical' has been borrowed from medicine, clinical psychology is not a medical psychology. I have borrowed the word 'clinical' from medicine, because it is the best term I can find to indicate the character of the

method which I deem necessary for this work. Words seldom retain their original significance, and clinical medicine, is not what the word implies, - the work of a practicing physician at the bedside of a patient. The term 'clinical' implies a method, and not a locality. (p. 251)

This quote implies that Witmer had an open mind and was an integrationist of disciplines. Perhaps this came from his varied course taking and constant change of major. Regardless, Witmer was willing to climb out of the experimental box and incorporate medical and educational models into the framework of psychology to better the lives of children. In addition, Witmer made it abundantly clear in his views that psychology needed to break away from labeling and focus on improving performance. As stated in a letter Witmer wrote, "If psychology was worth anything to me or to others it should be able to assist the efforts of a teacher in a retarded case of this kind" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 76). During the time he spent teaching at the Rugby Academy for boys, Witmer found himself tutoring a student preparing for entrance into college who suffered from severe language deficits. Today, the boy would most likely be diagnosed with dyslexia (McReynolds, 1997a). While Witmer's job was to prepare him in the necessary subjects and classes, he took it upon himself to take a step back and teach the student rudimentary English skills such as forms of words and parts of speech. Witmer did not believe that the student would be able to pass his entrance exam, but to his surprise the student succeeded (Witmer, 1907). This experience of Witmer's was the spark that lit the fire to his future work in applying psychology. His observation of a defective student who succeeded in school with additional help, Witmer realized that other deficits in children could be overcome by special education and applying the knowledge that he had obtained in his psychology coursework. Thus, we see the first occurrence of applied psychology. Yet even though Witmer made it clear in the late 1800's that psychology needed to move away from labeling and focus on improving performance, we still see an overabundance of labeling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Colleagues.**

Along with Witmer's article in 1907, which formally announced the new profession of clinical psychology, Witmer publicly criticized his colleagues again. In the first issue of *The Psychological Clinic*, Witmer's self-edited journal, he criticized both the Harvard and Cornell programs where two of his close colleagues worked—Hugo Munsterberg and Edward Titchener. Witmer ostracized these two programs for not sharing his belief in the importance of comparative work in child psychology, the science of psychology, and the importance of teachers. Witmer claimed that Harvard deemed experimental psychology was of no use for teachers, and criticized Cornell for its concentration on

introspection (McReynolds, 1997a). Here again, Witmer not only attacked psychologists, but attacked his close friends and colleagues. Throughout his career this pattern will continue. During the formation of his new profession, clinical psychologist, Witmer expelled self-assurance.

The attack on two top psychology departments and close colleagues emphasized Witmer's tendency to express himself bluntly even if it was impolite. Such an attack not only illustrates his assurance, assertiveness, and strong will, but also Witmer's level of commitment to his personal vision of psychology. He envisioned psychology as that which will help people, especially children, in overcoming their deficits. He saw psychology as a field of application coupled with research to support that application. It is apparent from such attacks as those against Harvard and Cornell that he devalued introspection and was beginning to devalue the importance of pure experimental psychology. However, it is possible that the numerous attacks made by Witmer could be the result of arrogance. It is only after he became known as a psychologist that he began to become argumentative. Furthermore, it was only after he had established his clinic and journal that his verbal attacks increased in frequency and decreased in professionalism. Maybe there was no room in the history books for such an arrogant and verbally combative psychologist.

After Witmer's attack on Harvard and Cornell was published, Munsterberg was the one who reacted with haste. The letter from Munsterberg to Witmer has not survived, but from that point on their friendship was over. They no longer attended the same experimental group meetings, and it seems that Witmer never apologized for his remarks against Munsterberg's department (McReynolds, 1997a). While it is a sad event in history to see two colleagues end a friendship over scientific differences, this incident adds to the evidence that Witmer was never willing to back down from what he believed. He thought that the Harvard and Cornell psychology departments were wrong in the way they were teaching psychology to their students, and he was not afraid to let Munsterberg, Titchener, and the rest of his colleagues know.

### **Witmer's Clinic**

Despite the attacks toward his colleagues, Witmer seemed to be doing well. His clinic was receiving positive response from the community and the University, along with many referrals. These referrals were mostly children. There were a few adult cases, yet the majority of adults involved were the parents of the children. Witmer used the term children, but today they would be considered adolescents (McReynolds, 1997a). The psychology laboratory saw a wide range of problems including academic learning problems, speech problems, developmental problems, and behavioral problems. Specifically, Witmer saw cases of delayed speech, stammering, aggressive behaviors, sleep disturbances,

crying to excess, refusal to stay in school, overexcitability (would now be considered hyperactivity), refusal to eat (would now be considered anorexia), melancholia, nervousness, fearfulness, vacant staring, and laughter without cause (McReynolds, 1997a). Interestingly, Witmer did not use the word “patient” and rarely used the term “case” when referring to his clients. Generally, he spoke of “the child” or used their name. In addition to borrowing the term “clinical” from medicine, Witmer also borrowed the terms “diagnosis”, “prognosis”, and “treatment” (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 121). His overall philosophy, while in the clinic and regarding the treatment of children, was to encourage each child to develop his or her capacities to their fullest (McReynolds, 1996). Witmer prided himself on observation and taught his students the importance of observation. He was very cautious with his diagnosis and emphasized to his students the importance of helping—not labeling (McReynolds, 1997b).

### ***Intelligent tests.***

One reason for the emphasis on observation was Witmer’s skepticism of mental tests, especially the intelligence tests that were growing in popularity at this time. He stressed to his students that they should not rely on such tests, even the two that he developed: the Witmer Formboard and the Witmer Cylinders (McReynolds, 1997b). Witmer’s opposition to mental tests was revealed in a letter to the editor of New York Times titled *Mental Tests*. In this letter, Witmer stated that results from such tests “gives us a measure of the individual’s efficiency— nothing else” (Witmer, 1922). Witmer continued that along with the results from the test, the observation made by the expert giving the test must be taken into consideration before an accurate and complete result can be made. This letter provides evidence that Witmer thinks holistically, and understands the role of society, before stigmatizing an individual with a label such as idiot or feeble-minded. “Society decides who is normal and who is not” (Witmer, 1922). By this, Witmer meant that a person was considered normal by society if they were able to function within that society and not if they were able to read or write. However, if given a mental test, a person would be deemed an idiot or feeble-minded if they could not read or write but could still function within that society. The fact that mental tests were becoming overused, and usually used incorrectly by non-experts, was most likely the reason that Witmer made such a stand against solely using mental tests. In his clinic, Witmer used the Witmer Formboard test and the Witmer Cylinders test along with observation. However, Witmer’s tests lost the popularity contest to the Stanford-Binet test of intelligence.

### ***Gifted children.***

Shortly after opening the first clinical psychology laboratory, Witmer’s attention seemed to expand to the

minds of normal and gifted children. In March 1908, the first issue of volume two of *The Psychological Clinic* was released. In it, Witmer made a plea for greater public concern with the welfare of children. He made clear that his goals were to enable each child to reach their full potential, including gifted and retarded children (McReynolds, 1997a). Here we begin to see Witmer’s transitional view of psychology from helping children to the overall welfare of children. Rather than just helping those with deficits, Witmer turned his attention toward those children considered normal or gifted. In the final paragraph of his essay, Witmer concluded there was no sharp line to be drawn between the pathological and the normal. He argued that *The Psychological Clinic* was not a journal for the study of the abnormal child, but a journal for the study of the individual child (McReynolds, 1997a). It appears Witmer was concerned for the welfare of all children—not just those deemed retarded.

In addition to the focus on the gifted, Witmer announced a distinction between different forms of retardation. He distinguished between psychophysiological retardation and pedagogical retardation (Witmer, 1909). Witmer defined physiological retardation as a child not being able to reach normal level of development for their chronological age; however, he defined pedagogical retardation as a child that reached adulthood without developing to their full capacity (Witmer, 1909).

### ***Comparative psychology.***

Witmer’s psychology laboratory, while designed for assisting children, began conducting research on animals. He expressed the possibility of teaching an ape to articulate at least a few elements of spoken language to William H Furness III, the curator of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Science and Arts. Shortly after, Furness brought Witmer an infant orangutan from Borneo in 1909. Furness and Witmer attempted to train the animal with little success. However, in September of that year, Witmer attended a performance at the Boston Keith Theater in which the main attraction was a trained chimpanzee named Peter. Witmer arranged for Peter to come to his clinic (McReynolds, 1997a). After conducting the same tests that he would on a child, Witmer announced that Peter, a chimpanzee, showed reasoning and may even be able to read, write, and speak given the correct conditions. Over the course of the following year, Witmer and Furness continued to conduct their tests on Peter. In 1910, Witmer announced that he believed Peter to be the mental “missing link” that Darwin and so many other evolutionary scientists had sought after (*A Monkey With a Mind*, 1910).

There seems to be no public record of response to Witmer’s claims. The silence by his colleagues was much louder than any negative retort. Could this have been the downfall of Witmer that led to him becoming erased? Perhaps Witmer’s colleagues in education and psychology

turned their backs on him as he compared children to chimpanzees. A response from Witmer's colleagues is only speculative since none is recorded. Since none had been recorded, it may be safe to assume that Witmer's colleagues paid him no attention while he attempted to train a chimpanzee to read and write. The public's response seems one of disdain. An article reporting the events shed light on Witmer's study of animals. "Witmer became sidetracked from the children and teamed up with Dr. William H. Furness to study monkey psychology" (Trick Chimpanzee Fulfills Mind Test, 1909, p. 7).

Witmer's announcement of the "missing link" was ahead of his time in addition to the application of psychology as a profession. Witmer predicted within a few years chimpanzees would be reared in childlike environments. In the 1930s, W.N. and L.A. Kellogg adopted an infant monkey into their home (McReynolds, 1997a). The adoption by the Kellogg's, twenty years after Witmer's announcement of Peter and his novel prediction, further insinuated Witmer's advanced ideas and wide range of intellectual curiosity. In the 1900s, his claim probably would have been seen as ridiculous and outrageous. It is such a tragedy that during his time Witmer may have no longer been taken seriously and has hence been forgotten throughout time. While a comparison of animal to children may not have been well received by the community, it does not seem drastic enough for almost complete erasure from history.

### ***Witmer Attacks Again***

During Witmer's study of Peter, he also found time to complete a three part review and critique which appeared in the last three issues of volume two of *The Psychological Clinic*. The reviews concerned three publications: *Religion and Medicine* by Elwood Worcester, the first issue of the journal *Psychotherapy: A Course of Reading in Sound Psychology, Sound Medicine, and Sound Religion*, and *Letters to a Neurologist* by Joseph Collins (McReynolds, 1997a). Witmer viewed these three works as antisecularism, especially the works of Elwood Worcester. Elwood Worcester was the leader in the spiritual and psychological movement that became very popular during Witmer's time. This spiritual and psychological movement was known as Emmanuelism and emphasized the role of the church in treating mental ailment through Christian psychotherapy, prayer, and occasional hypnosis. Witmer attacked Emmanuelism with vigor stating that the approach was unscientific and fraudulent. Moreover, Witmer considered Christian Science, spiritualism, and occultism as the antithesis of science (McReynolds, 1997a). During Witmer's attack on Emmanuelism, he again attacked Hugo Munsterberg. Munsterberg had recently announced his extensive cures of alcoholics through suggestion and hypnosis. Witmer

feverously attacked Munsterberg, claiming he was not following ordinary scientific standards in evaluating his treatments (McReynolds, 1997a). Such a blatant and forceful attack on Munsterberg (for the second time), Emmanuelism, and Christian Science as a whole indicates the level of frustration that Witmer felt at hearing the blending of spirituality and psychology. A little bit of the experimentalist must still have been within Witmer, for he attacked their standards and approach to science and treatment. This strong, forceful stance against spirituality was a little surprising considering that Witmer was raised in a spiritual household. However, due to his extensive education in experimental psychology, perhaps he had separated the spiritual world from the scientific world. Perhaps somewhere along the way, not recorded since Witmer was such an introvert, he had lost his spirituality and saw no place for it at all. We can only speculate as to why Witmer was so absolutely opposed to the thought of incorporating spirituality with psychology.

As Witmer's career continued he became more and more aggressive. He attempted to remove the philosophers from APA, succeeded in co-creating a society for experimentalists, founded a new profession of application that went against the prominent pure science model of psychology, attacked the psychology departments of Harvard and Cornell, attacked Munsterberg on two separate occasions, and brutally attacked the entire philosophy of Emmanuelism. At this point, Witmer turned his attentions to William James. Witmer's primary criticism of James was his interest in occult and transnormal phenomena, which he felt were unscientific (McReynolds, 1997a). Although James can be considered the most popular psychologist of the time, Witmer, the headstrong or arrogant man that he was, did not back down from the popularity contest. "A philosopher-psychologist, temperamentally interested in mysticism, professionally engaged in philosophy, and temporarily assuming the role of psychologist, Professor James represents today the role of an academic tradition" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 145). In this quote, Witmer evaluated James as neither an experimentalist nor a psychologist. Rather, Witmer deemed James to be a litterateur, whose work was "characterized by a pronounced interest in psychological subjects" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 145). To claim that James was nothing more than a litterateur with an interest in psychology was quite bold and brutal. Although Witmer was probably not the only individual to criticize James, Witmer's attacks stood out from others in the fact that they were personal. Witmer referred to James as "the spoiled child of American Psychology" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 145). Such statements made in this three part review were the strongest Witmer had ever made in regards to his opposition of colleagues and theories. Although these statements were bold in themselves, Witmer took it a step further and sent James and Munsterberg personal copies. James, who received the

more forceful and personal attack, laughed it off. Munsterberg, on the other hand, was furious. Munsterberg went so far as to contact the APA and protest that Witmer be expelled from the association. However, no action was taken and Witmer was never expelled from the APA (McReynolds, 1997a).

### ***From Heredity to Environment***

#### ***Criminal behavior.***

The following years were followed by an increased interest in the gifted child coupled with a fight against intelligence testing. In the early 1900s, Witmer's attention turned toward the etiology of criminal behavior and other deficits. In 1910 Witmer publicly announced his environmental, as opposed to hereditary, views of human defects including criminal behavior of children. In this year, Witmer published "The Restoration of Children of the Slums." Witmer continued his theme that heredity was important but it was not all there was to the story. This theme is articulated here:

One does not expect figs to grow from thistles, and the slum child seems naturally destined by the force of heredity to grow into an inefficient adult. There are many reasons, however, for repudiating this belief in the potency of heredity.... The inefficient product of the slum is the result of the treatment received during infancy and childhood. (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 157)

This quote nicely illustrated the fact that Witmer understood that heredity is somewhat important, yet saw the importance of the child's environment. The remainder of the article focused on case studies. Throughout the article, Witmer made interesting statements against the view of heredity. In regards to morals, Witmer attested that he does not believe in the existence of criminal instincts (McReynolds, 1997a). In regards to the environmental role on a child's development Witmer stated, "Certainly all of this child's defects flowed directly from the impoverished condition of her family" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 158). Witmer was focused on the role of the environment in relation to its effect on a child—both morally and developmentally. As mentioned in the beginning, Witmer viewed defects not as a disease or a defect of the brain. Thus, retardation for Witmer was not of an organic nature. Rather, Witmer defined retardation "in terms of individual capacity for physical and mental development" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 158). Rather than focusing on any organic basis for retardation, Witmer focused on the worth of each individual. Witmer's goal for children was to reach his or her full potential. This goal for children is analogous with today's humanistic approach to psychology.

#### ***Children.***

Witmer has always been an advocate for children. He appeared to always have their best interest in heart.

However, in 1911, there seemed to be a bit of controversy in his views. In this year Witmer supported a bill in Pennsylvania Legislature to provide for the sterilization of severely retarded males (McReynolds, 1997a). His support in this bill seemed to go against everything that he had fought for in regards to children's rights. However, an historical note must be made that may have been the influence on Witmer's stance. At this time, the eugenics movement was rapidly gaining influence, and Witmer was not immune to its influence. However, a statement made in his 1910 article, previously discussed, may provide some insight into his support of the eugenics movement. "To conserve the children of the next generation... we must begin by restoring their future parents, the children of this generation" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 162). Witmer had the best interest of children still in mind, yet it is still surprising that Witmer became influenced by such a movement considering his strong stubbornness and refusal to back down from what he believed to be truth.

His concern for the welfare of all children is further illustrated in 1912, when he decided to take a leave from the University in order to study pedagogical methods with exceptional children used by Maria Montessori in Italy (McReynolds, 1997a). Similar to some individuals today, Witmer was annoyed with the careless use of the word *genius*. Witmer has been remembered as strongly objecting to the assertion that an individual is a genius if they obtain a score of 140 or more on the Binet-Simon test. Instead, Witmer insisted that the term genius be reserved for those individuals who make a contribution that goes beyond his own time that later generations will recognize as being great (McReynolds, 1996). Witmer was yet again ahead of his time. While the popular idea of the time was to give an IQ test and label that individual a genius if they score well, Witmer was opposed to this idea just as many are today. Witmer's opposition to IQ tests and the reservation of the term genius is another example of his willingness to stand for what he believed, speak out against those he thought were wrong, and that his ideas were ahead of his times. While many psychologists were caught up in the IQ test craze, Witmer recognized the limitations that others were not ready to hear.

### ***The Beginning of the End***

December of 1917, Witmer showed his humanitarian side again. He took an extended leave of absence in order to work for the Red Cross during World War I. His focus during the war was on rehabilitation of persons left homeless by the ravages of war. Witmer did not return to the University of Pennsylvania until June of 1918. Unfortunately, during his stay in Italy, Witmer missed the formation of the American Association of Clinical Psychology (McReynolds, 1997a).

After Witmer's service in the war, it appears that his life and career were slowing down. While he was still fighting intelligence testing and studying the gifted, the

next few decades were marked by sad occasions for Witmer with a few honorary proceedings. During the 1920s, both his mother and his good friend Edward Titchener passed away. Witmer cut back on his teaching hours and was no longer publishing (McReynolds, 1997a). During the 1930s Witmer was paid tribute to by the University of Pennsylvania and all of his former students and colleagues. The University presented Witmer with a copy of the commemorative volume, *Clinical Psychology: Studies in Honor of Lightner Witmer* (McReynolds, 1997a). During his speech, Witmer made note of the response by his former colleagues in regards to his notion of clinical psychology, "...they laughed, all of them. They thought my ideas unworthy of notice" (McReynolds, 1997a, p. 240). Whether these comments made by Witmer were indeed truth or a fallacy brought on by his insecurity, Witmer was ridiculed, laughed at, and felt unworthy in those earlier, pioneering days. If only he knew what became of his field today and could see how prominent Clinical Psychology has become.

In addition to honoring Witmer, the 1930s was famous for far more. In 1935 the last issue of *The Psychological Clinic* appeared. Lightner Witmer oversaw, and worked in the clinical laboratory until he retired in 1937 (Dr. Lightner Witmer, Founder of Clinics and Expert on Mentally Retarded, Dies, 1956). The university marked the occasion of his retirement by awarding Witmer with an honorary degree of *doctoris in scientia* (McReynolds, 1997a). This was a rollercoaster decade for Witmer. It was marked by events that honored his work and contributions, yet it was also a decade of cessation. Although Witmer retired from the university (George Twitmeyer took over as head of the Psychological Clinic), he continued to operate his self-owned school at Devon at the age of 70 (McReynolds, 1997a).

Witmer's journal, *The Psychological Clinic*, had been on hiatus since before his retirement. In an attempt to continue the journal, since Witmer was no longer able to keep up in his old age, he offered his journal (along with its extensive subscription list) to the American Association of Applied Psychology (AAAP). The only limitation that Witmer submitted was that the AAAP keep the title (McReynolds, 1997a). After a two year debate, the AAAP decided that they could not take over Witmer's journal and that there was only room for their own journal—*The Journal of Consulting Psychology* (McReynolds 1997a). The permanent cessation of the journal was a preparation for the end of Witmer's writing and life.

The last well-known publication by Witmer was the newspaper article regarding Peter the chimpanzee. Thirty-two years before his death, Witmer wrote a short letter to the editor of New York Times regarding mental tests (Witmer, 1922). Witmer did not have his name in print again until his obituary in 1956. Witmer passed

away, July 19<sup>th</sup>, at Bryn Mawr from heart failure at the age of 89 (McReynolds, 1997a). His death came an astounding 60 years after he established the first psychological clinic and 19 years after his retirement. Although he was retired, Witmer never stopped working for the betterment of children. He was the last surviving charter member of the American Psychological Association (McReynolds, 1997a). Interestingly, the APA does not offer an obituary for Lightner Witmer on their website among the many other psychologists. The American Psychological Association, along with the majority of psychologists, have forgotten a hero among clinical psychologists.

Lightner Witmer contributed a great deal to many facets of psychology and education. He founded clinical psychology—including the first clinical psychology laboratory—and aided in the development of special education, school psychology, and applied psychology. Through this discovery of Lightner Witmer, both as a professional and person, there appears to be many plausible reasons as to why he has been somewhat erased from current history and psychology textbooks. For one, he was extremely argumentative. While he was a very headstrong person, his willingness to lash out against his colleagues may have contributed to his downfall. After he had triumphed through the criticism towards his theory of applying psychology, he became a successful clinical psychologist. It is a common trend in those who are successful to become isolated from those who have helped. This trend seems evident throughout Witmer's career.

Another plausible reason for Witmer's erasure was his ideas. Although he had brilliant ideas, most were flawed. While examining his theories of intelligence, there was no way to empirically test them. The word theory is used rather loosely, for Witmer stated his view as fact rather than offering a hypothesis. Again, it was Witmer's way or no way. The fact that Witmer would state his theory as fact and offer no plausible way to test his theories is surprising since he has a strong background in experimental psychology. Witmer, until the end of his career, always had a part of the experimentalist in him. Was he so blinded by his aspiration of application that he could not see this? Despite the problem with Witmer's theories on intelligence, many of his views were ahead of his time. I theorize this is the main reason why Witmer has been forgotten. Witmer's ideas from the beginning (e.g., application of psychology) were more congruent with the knowledge of today than it was of the 1900s. From the responses, or rather the lack thereof, to Witmer's ideas and notions of where psychology should and will lead the human species, it is evident that he was unappreciated in his time. Uncovering the lack of appreciation towards Lightner Witmer's contribution to the field logically leads us to his erasure. Historical books are written with the bias of those with the pen and paper. Since the people of his time, and the authors of the history

books, did not appreciate Witmer, he was not included from the beginning. As time passes, history books are written from previous history books. It has only been within the last decade that Lightner Witmer has begun to be recognized for his contributions to psychology and education. He truly is a forgotten hero of psychology.

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