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Women Make History: Stories We Should Have Learned in School

***“The truest thing to be said at
present is that scientific
evidence plays very little part.”***

Helen Thompson Woolley

Referring to gender differences



Helen Woolley, photographer unknown

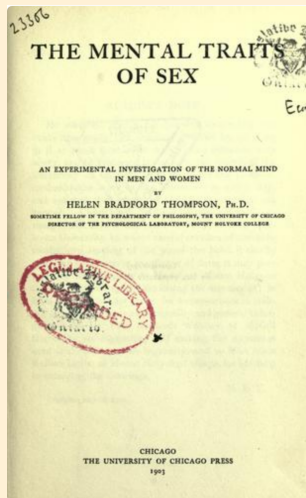
Helen Thompson Woolley: Debunking Sentimental Rot

In 1900, Helen Thompson Woolley became one of the [first](#) women to earn a PhD in the burgeoning and male-dominated field of psychology. For her dissertation, she conducted groundbreaking research on the perceived psychological differences between men and women, upending culturally entrenched assumptions. She later pioneered research into early childhood education, resulting in changes to child labor laws. Throughout her career, Woolley battled gender discrimination and advocated for women's rights.

A Brilliant Scholar: [Born](#) Helen Thompson in Chicago in 1874, her parents believed in educating their daughters. She graduated as valedictorian from high school and her speech centered on the [premise](#) that scientific knowledge is "key to curing social ills and advancing humanity." She won a scholarship to the newly established University of Chicago and enrolled in the Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Pedagogy. She also studied neurology. In 1897, she earned her philosophy degree, then pursued graduate studies in psychology with a minor in neurology. Three years later, she was [awarded](#) her PhD summa cum laude.

Disproving Gender Stereotypes: In graduate school, Woolley was fascinated by whether the culturally accepted differences between men and women actually existed. At the time, [evolution theory](#) held that because men faced [more](#) physical challenges, such as fighting wars and hunting for food, women were less evolved. It was also commonly believed that men had larger brains and therefore women were also intellectually inferior.

Even women's mental health was viewed in biological terms. The Greek word for "uterus" translates as "hysteria," a formal medical [diagnosis](#) ascribed to women who stepped outside accepted norms such as divorce, rejecting traditional roles, or embracing sexuality. Women who were depressed, anxious, or emotional were often diagnosed as suffering from hysteria. Treatments often included isolation, bed rest, and even being institutionalized.



Against this backdrop, Woolley was the first person to scientifically investigate psychological differences of the sexes. She [devised](#) a series of tests to compare the performances of 25 male and 25 female students on sensory, motor, and intellectual tasks. She found that men performed better on motor skills and ingenuity, while women scored higher on sensory discrimination, memory, and association tasks. But Woolley [concluded](#) that the differences could be traced to "social influences on the developing individual," such as the toys and games they were given as children and the physical activities they engaged in.

When Woolley published her results in 1903 as "Psychological Norms in Men and Women" (later republished as "The Mental Traits of Sex"), it rocked the scientific and cultural world. Her conclusion that women and men have similar mental function ran contrary to the beliefs that women were ill-equipped to handle mental and physical stress.

Those beliefs prevented women from participating in many physical activities, including most sports, and were used to restrict women from intellectual pursuits and careers. As late as 2005, the president of the International Olympic Committee [said](#) that women shouldn't be allowed to compete in ski jumping because "it seems not to be appropriate for ladies from a medical point of view." In 2014, after numerous legal challenges, female ski jumpers were finally admitted to the Winter Olympics.

While Woolley was praised for her methodology, she was criticized for her findings. She stood firm. In 1910, she [wrote](#), "There is perhaps no field aspiring to be scientific where flagrant personal bias, logic martyred in the cause of supporting a prejudice, unfounded assertions, and even sentimental rot and drivel, have run riot to such an extent as here."

After graduate school, Woolley became a professor at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts, where she taught logic, philosophy, and psychology. She left in 1905, married, had children, and moved to Cincinnati. As a married woman, Woolley was denied academic positions because cultural norms dictated that she devote herself to her family. Instead, she became an applied researcher in education and childhood development.

Research in Early Childhood Education: Although her career options were limited, in 1911, she was appointed director of the Bureau for the Investigation of Working Children to study the effects of child labor. Ohio had passed a law allowing children ages 14-16 who had completed the fifth grade to leave school to work. Woolley devised studies to compare working with non-working students. She [tested](#) more than 5,000 children multiple times over several years, establishing a precedent for utilizing psychological testing in vocational and educational arenas. Her [research](#) contributed to the implementation of child labor laws.

In 1921, the family moved to Michigan, where Woolley became assistant director of the [Merrill-Palmer School](#), a nursery school that taught child care courses. It was one of the first nursery schools in the country that doubled as a laboratory. Again, Woolley's research led to changes in early childhood education and the implementation of early intervention programs designed to help students later on. Also in 1921, she was named the first woman president of the National Vocational Guidance Association.

Although Woolley's professional life was thriving, her personal life began to disintegrate. Her husband left for California in 1923 to pursue treatment for cancer and he filed for divorce three years later. Although Woolley lived in Michigan, she accepted a prestigious position as Director of Teachers College at Columbia University in New York to establish the Institute for Child Welfare Research, and she began commuting between Michigan and New York.

Facing Her Own Challenges: The same year, Woolley faced her own physical and mental challenges. Diagnosed with a tumor, she had to have a hysterectomy and appendectomy. When her best friend died, she [suffered](#) a mental breakdown and spent a year in recovery. Woolley attempted to return to her former position, but was eventually forced to resign. Convinced that she was forced out because of gender, she later [wrote](#) in an unpublished autobiography: "...When one party in a gentleman's agreement is a woman, with no written evidence of the agreement, it counts for little. That I did not understand at the time." Woolley never worked again.

Woolley continued to struggle with mental health issues, and when the Great Depression settled in, she also struggled with money. She moved in with her daughter and died in 1947 from an aneurysm. She was 73.

During her career, Woolley [published](#) three books and about fifty articles. In addition to her dissertation, her best-known works include: *Sensory Affection and Emotion* (1907); *The Development of Right Handedness in a Normal Infant* (1910), *The Psychology of Sex* (1914); and *A New Scale of Mental and Physical Measurements for Adolescents and Some of Its Uses* (1915).



Helen Woolley, circa 1926, at the Merrill-Palmer School, photographer unknown

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: Are there certain sports or career opportunities where I think it's appropriate to discriminate based on gender?

Ask a friend: Have you ever denied someone participation because of their gender? Would you handle it differently today?

Let's Meet Up in Utah and California...

September:

- **Wednesday, Sep. 9, The Owl & Fork Luncheon**, 11 a.m., Town Club, Salt Lake City
- **Wednesday, Sep. 15, Emerson Street Book Club**, 6:30 p.m., hosted by Nia Shearer, Salt Lake City
- **Thursday, Sep. 17, Books by the Bay**, 6 p.m., Sausalito, CA
- **Sunday, Sep. 20, Book Passage**, 1 p.m., Corte Madera, CA

October:

- **Sunday, Oct. 4, Wasatch Back Book Festival**, 1 - 5 p.m., Park City Library, Park City, Utah
- **Wednesday, Oct. 7, Banned Books with the ACLU**, 5 p.m., Park City Library, Park City, Utah
- **Friday, Oct. 9, Women of Visionary Influence (WOVI)**, 5:30 p.m., MST, Virtual Event
- **Saturday, Oct. 10, Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)**, 1 p.m., Salt Lake City
- **Wednesday, Oct. 21, The Other Book Club!**, 7 p.m., Sandy, Utah
- **Wednesday, Oct. 28, University of Utah, Osher Lunch & Learn**, 12 noon, MST, Virtual Event

Check the [Events Page](#) of my website for details and additional upcoming gatherings. I look forward to connecting!

Other News...In August, *Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience* won the [Gold Quill Award for Nonfiction](#) from The League of Utah Writers!

Tickets On Sale for the 2027 [Booklovers Winter Festival](#) - February 6, 9 a.m. - 8 p.m., bringing together book lovers, authors, and publishers for readings, trivia, and lots of literary fun. I'll be speaking (time TBD) at This Is the Place Heritage Park, Salt Lake City.

You're Amazing: Help keep the stories of remarkable women alive. Let me know what you're up to. Share the newsletter and the book, [Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#). Available at Indie Bookstores, [Barnes & Noble](#), [Amazon](#), [Kindle](#), [BookShop](#), and on my website.

I'm passionate about all things Mary Ware Dennett, a pivotal leader of the women's suffrage and reproductive rights movements. A grant from the Schlesinger Library forwarded my research on Dennett. My articles about her have been published in [Ms.](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and more. My new book, [Women Make](#)



[History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#), highlights the stories of remarkable women who, like Dennett, achieved great things only to be swept aside by history or have their achievements wrongly attributed to men.

If you'd like a speaker, [reach out!](#) I'd love to speak to your business, school, women's group, book club, or civic organization in person or via Zoom.

Join the Women Make History Community!

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and encourage others to subscribe:

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