

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on May 7, 2002, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Robert Winthrop White was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

ROBERT WINTHROP WHITE

BORN: October 17, 1904

DIED: February 6, 2001

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Robert Winthrop White was born on October 17, 1904. He entered Harvard in 1921, concentrating in history and graduating magna cum laude in 1925. White took no psychology courses as an undergraduate, although a sociology course introduced him to William McDougall's social psychology. This offered a sociobiological account of human social sentiments and instincts, and impressed White with the irrational in human nature.

After graduation White remained at Harvard a year to take a master's degree in history which was followed by a position teaching freshman history at the University of Maine in Orono. White enjoyed teaching and decided that he wanted to make college teaching his career. He planned to enter doctoral study but became increasingly unsure that the subject should be history.

A colleague, Donald MacKinnon, introduced him to the ideas of Henry A. Murray at Harvard. White began reading in psychology and eventually wrote to Edwin G. Boring, the chairman of Harvard's Psychology Department, about the possibility of doing doctoral work in psychology. Boring, who didn't like the idea of someone with no background in psychology coming into graduate work in his department, responded to White with the comment that if he enrolled "I don't see how we can keep you out."

In 1928, White began graduate work in psychology and was instantly unhappy. In a memoir of his later years, he would title his description of his early graduate training: "A Humanist Strays Into Psychology." He had not understood that academic psychology, at Harvard and elsewhere, was dominated by the brass instrument laboratories of experimental psychology,

devoted to precise studies of psychophysics, sensation, perception, and reaction time. He gave up his side job as a church organist in order to work the 80-hour week that Boring declared was essential to success in the field. He worked on laboratory experiments that he would later characterize as barren and trivial, and participated in methodological discussions that he described as “brilliant forensic games.”

Fortunately, he was helped by another colleague who, like White, had never completed a single course in psychology. Henry Murray had already completed an M.D. and a Ph.D. in biochemistry when he realized that he was deeply interested in the inner nature of human beings as it was then being written about by Jung and Freud. Murray had served as Morton Prince’s assistant in the Harvard Psychological Clinic and in 1933 succeeded Prince, directing the Clinic and serving as assistant professor in the Psychology Department. Murray was not shy. He referred to the work of the psychology laboratory as “ear, nose, and throat psychology.”

White’s interests were much better served by the courses in abnormal psychology and personality, as then offered by Morton Prince and Henry Murray. However, in 1930 White postponed his graduate studies to take an academic position teaching psychology at Rutgers University. Three years later he returned to graduate study at Harvard, receiving the doctoral degree in 1937. The co-incidental absence of Henry Murray created the need for an interim director of the Clinic. White was appointed in 1937 to that responsibility with the rank of Instructor, a position that he held for four years. From 1941 to 1943 he held an appointment as Research Associate in the Psychological Clinic, and from 1943 to 1946 as a Lecturer on Psychology. He was appointed Lecturer on Clinical Psychology in 1946 and Professor of Clinical Psychology in 1958, retiring as *Emeritus* Professor in 1968.

From the outset of his work in personality White was disenchanted with quantitative methods that produce cross-sectional findings from tests and questionnaires, preferring instead the detailed study of individual life histories. In this, his views and techniques resembled those of his colleagues in the Department of Social Relations Henry Murray and Erik Erikson, and, to some extent, Gordon Allport. His goal was to understand what he termed the “shape of personality” by examining the complex details of individual lives. Understanding was to be achieved by the hermeneutic analysis of life histories. Analysis was guided by the presuppositions of dynamic psychology, and conducted with the premise that personality inevitably changed over the life span and could not be captured by a static description of individuals at a specific point in life. His work did not fit comfortably with the then prevailing emphasis upon measurable stable traits of personality and temperament, with probable specific genetic origins and only minimally modifiable with the passage of time.

White’s first book, “The Abnormal Personality: A Textbook,” published in 1948, presented an account of disordered behavior, focusing primarily on neuroses and giving lesser

attention to psychoses. White had no formal training in psychopathology, and his approach reflected an emphasis upon the development of the neuroses in explicitly Neo- Freudian terms. Biological factors were mentioned, but the major emphasis was on the putative rôle of defense mechanisms in the genesis of symptoms. The book remained a standard text in the field through five editions.

White's work in personality is perhaps best exemplified in his book. "Lives in Progress," an account of the psychological development of a number of psychiatrically healthy persons, first published in 1952, and subsequent editions in 1966 and 1975.

In later years White turned his attention to competence, conceived as an inborn motive of many complex creatures and not amenable to explanation by behavioristic drive- reduction theories or psychodynamic concepts of motivational conflicts. His 1959 paper "Motivation reconsidered: the concept of competence" was well-received and led to a series of later series of later papers on the topic, culminating in his "The Enterprise of Living" published four years after his retirement in 1968.

For five years (1957-1962) White served as chair of the Department of Social Relations managing with kindness and tact to deal with the inevitable vicissitudes of the activities of strong minded colleagues from diverse disciplines. He truly reflected a combination of scholarship and gentleness not often seen.

Robert White died in Weston, Mass., on the 6th of February 2001. His wife, Margaret Ley Bazeley, and a son, Timothy, predeceased him. He is survived by his son David.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert F. Bales
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