

# Madison Bentley

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Madison Bentley, Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, entered Cornell in 1895 as one of the early graduate students in Psychology, having completed his undergraduate training in the University of Nebraska. After receiving the Ph.D. degree in 1898, he remained as a member of the Cornell Faculty until 1912, when he was called to the University of Illinois as Director of its Laboratory of Psychology. Upon Professor Titchener's death, Professor Bentley returned to Cornell in 1928 as Susan Linn Sage Professor of Psychology and Chairman of the Department, remaining in this position until 1938. After his retirement he served for two years as consultant on the staff of the Library of Congress and then moved to Palo Alto, California. He continued to be active in writing and editorial duties throughout his remaining years.

Professor Bentley's interests within psychology and in related disciplines were always very broad. His early research ranged from sensory and perceptual problems in man to the learning capacities of one-celled animals. He was long concerned with the psychological disorders in man, and edited a volume on this subject which brought together the views of neurologists, psychoanalysts, psychobiologists and experimental psychologists. The early history and development of man as a species was another of his continuing studies, and he was widely informed in the field of anthropology. He directed psychological fieldwork among the Indians of New Mexico during many of his summers. Another major interest lay in the physiological and biological bases of psychological activity, and he kept abreast of developments in the fields of neurology and endocrinology. For many years he was active in the affairs of the American Otological Society as well as in psychological organizations.

During the years at Illinois, Professor Bentley began to develop a point of view in psychology which diverged more and more sharply from that which prevailed at Cornell under Professor Titchener. The first glimpses from this point of view appeared in *The Field of Psychology* published in 1927. The new features of this view became more clearly distinguished in *The New Field of Psychology* (1934) which was a completely new book rather than a revision of the former *Field*. He continued to develop this approach to his subject in many articles appearing in the *American Journal of Psychology* during his years at Cornell and later when in retirement. The view of psychology which he developed was distinct, not only from the earlier Cornell approach, but also from most of the theoretical trends in American psychology at large.

In formulating his point of view, Professor Bentley insisted that psychology was an independent discipline, with problems and concepts of its own. As he viewed the current developments in psychology, it was losing its identity and its central aims through the pressures from medical treatment of the disordered, from educational problems of learning, from biological approaches to animal behavior, and from sociology. Instead of providing an independent base from which these related disciplines might borrow needed facts and principles, and to which they might contribute their own findings, psychology was borrowing its concepts and methods intact from these other disciplines. These other disciplines were developing their own partial or one-sided psychologies (for example, psychoanalysis) which were deficient in that they did not pay proper regard to the problems and research of psychology as a whole. "Modern psychology" was a sort of potpourri of these partial theories with no clear central theme or integrating principles.

Psychology, he thought, must therefore secure its independence from these related but distinct concerns, just as it had earlier broken away from philosophy. Psychology was not ready for theories and systems yet, for it did not even have its own body of descriptive data uncontaminated by these accessory subjects. Professor Bentley therefore set out to formulate the problems of psychology in an independent manner, and to gather a body of descriptive data from this same point of view. He aimed to describe as clearly as possible what the organism does, and what the results of this activity are. At the same time, what we know about bodily structures and mechanisms could be related to the descriptive data in order to begin a formulation of how the organism performs its functions and what controls its activities. Professor Titchener's psychology had also been largely descriptive, but it had been conceived along much narrower lines and with restrictions which had been dictated by earlier philosophical distinctions, distinctions which would not withstand an unbiased scrutiny.

It was for the graduate students who worked directly with him that this approach to psychology had its greatest effect. Although the point of view was so broad that these students were not obviously labeled as "Bentleyites" or "Cornell Functionalists," their subsequent research and writing shows the kind of critical and independent spirit which Professor Bentley instilled in them during their years at Cornell. These students found Professor Bentley ever ready to discuss their research and ideas with them, to give them searching but fair criticism. Those whose ideas had been clarified by these conferences could have confidence that their ideas were ready for the most careful inspection by the profession.

Professor Bentley also devoted a large portion of his time over many years to editorial activities. He was an editor of the *American Journal of Psychology* from 1926 through 1950, of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* from 1926

through 1929, and of *Psychological Index* from 1916 through 1925. He regarded his editorial duty as much more than the routine preparation of manuscripts for the printer. Authors were given detailed critiques for guidance in rewriting, and Professor Bentley himself made detailed revisions of many of the manuscripts. For the writing of his students he set a high standard of critical evaluation and of style, insisting that careless usage and laboratory slang had no place in a published report of research, any more than did illogical or muddled thinking. The influence of Professor Bentley's editorial labors, even though it cannot be measured, must have been very great, and it must have played a substantial part in raising the standards of research and publication in American psychology.

Among the honors which he received in recognition of his contributions to psychology were the presidency of the American Psychological Association (1925), election as fellow of the National Institute of Psychology, the Chairmanship of the Division of Anthropology and Psychology of the National Research Council (1930-31), and an honorary LL.D. from the University of Nebraska (1935).

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