

4-1-1987

‘Thank You Howard For the Experience’

James A. Boynton

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Boynton, James A. (1987) "‘Thank You Howard For the Experience,'" *New Directions*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol14/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.



'Thank You Howard For the Experience'

My experience with my teachers at Howard directly influenced my approach to study at the Ph.D. level.

By James A. Boynton

In 1896, a young man named George L. Baynton left his home in rural Virginia to enroll in what was then known as Howard University's Preparatory Department. In those days the nation's educational system, especially in rural Virginia, did little to prepare Black youth to undertake college level education. In order to cope with this problem, Howard University established its Preparatory Department where young Black men and women could prepare themselves for entry into college. George Baynton, my father, took advantage of this opportunity and later went on to

graduate from Howard's Medical School in 1906. He then settled in Philadelphia where he practiced medicine.

As a youngster, I grew up in a Howard University-oriented home. A large picture of the campus of the early 1900s occupied a prominent position in our home. Many of our family friends were Howard alumni; the family regularly participated in Howard events. It follows then, upon completion of high school, the only college I considered attending was Howard.

Let me sketch some of the broader aspects of my college experiences at Howard: A sense of high quality in the



courses and teachers; the special appreciation of being in contact with or in proximity to truly outstanding Black individuals; opportunities to hear lectures or speeches that brought insight into the problems of Black people throughout the world; participation as an usher in the Sunday Chapel services and the experience of listening to a variety of enriching thoughts and the music of a glorious choir; serving as treasurer of the student council, member of two championship basketball teams and being an active participant in the campus social scene.

A critical thing that happened to me very

early at Howard was my encounter with the psychology department. In the fall of my second year, I signed up for an introductory course in psychology taught by a dynamic young teacher named Alonzo Davis (later head of psychology at Tuskegee). This so stimulated my interest in the field that I took additional courses with the three other teachers in the department — Francis Sumner, Max Meenes and Frederick Watts.

At the time there was something about the approach of the psychology department that I really did not fully grasp or understand. I do now. The approach of the department was to provide the students

with the opportunity to become aware of psychology in all its various manifestations. Those teachers introduced undergraduate students to basic experimental psychology, courses in learning, social psychology, statistics, applied psychology, abnormal psychology, the psychology of religion and psychology through literature. What the program offered was a broad perspective on the areas of concerns with which psychology grappled.

After receiving my B.S. degree in psychology, I continued at Howard and obtained my M.S. degree. The department's program at the M.S. level was an intensive

I felt quite comfortable with the atmosphere at Howard.

continuation of the broad approach of the undergraduate curriculum, which was designed to prepare students to continue on to the Ph.D. degree in psychology even though at that time Howard did not offer the Ph.D. degree in the field. For example, at that time (the mid-1930s) candidates for a Ph.D. had to pass, among other things, examinations in French and German. The M.S. program in psychology at Howard required students to take a course in Readings in French Psychology and a course in Readings in German Psychology, both taught by Sumner and Meens. So those of us who went to other institutions to earn the Ph.D. were already prepared to tackle these language examinations.

My next stop, the next year, was Columbia University where I began work on my Ph.D. By this time I had committed myself to a career as a psychologist. What did "a career as a psychologist" mean to a Black individual in 1936? The prospect was to become a teacher of psychology in a Black college. That was an attractive prospect to me because I was increasingly developing interest in the substantive matter that psychology dealt with; the academic life, as I had seen it at Howard, appealed to me.

With my career goal set and with my expectation that I would spend the rest of my life teaching in a Black college or colleges set as well, my experiences with my teachers at Howard directly influenced my approach to study at the Ph.D. level. I have already noted that the psychology program at Howard, both on the B.S. and M.S. levels, was broad-based. That program exposed students to every basic aspect of psychology in terms of concepts, applications and methods. As I looked forward to becoming a teacher of psychology, I just naturally assumed that it was my responsibility to prepare myself so that I could emulate the teachers at Howard who had served as models for me.

The Right Model

Today there is the widespread view that

Black students in psychology should concentrate on what to me seems a very restricted notion of the field. That was not the model with which I "grew up." My model led me to take advantage of the opportunities represented in Ph.D. level study to expose myself to the basic concepts, applications and method of the field-at-large.

A case in point: In my Howard program, I had learned about something called "psychophysics," that branch of psychology that studies the effect of physical processes upon a person's mental processes. The very name can be awe-inspiring. When I got to the Ph.D. level I felt that I had to "learn" psychophysics. As a prospective teacher, I felt it was incumbent upon me to move beyond the "learn about" stage. I further assumed that if psychophysics was important in psychology it was my responsibility to prepare myself so that I could be competent to transfer this knowledge to my future students. At that stage in my life, it never occurred to me that someone, some day, might say: "Why on earth should Black psychology students bother with something like psychophysics?"

This broad-based type of approach, brought about by my natural interest and my assumed responsibility to my future students, made my Ph.D. study and research a period of excitement.

The sudden death of my father at the end of my year at Columbia made it necessary for me to transfer to the University of Pennsylvania, from which I subsequently received my Ph.D.

My first teaching job was at Virginia State College (now university). When I went to Virginia State in 1939 I learned something that I had not realized before. At that time, psychology in Black colleges usually consisted of only a few applicable courses in departments of education — courses such as Educational Psychology, Child Psychology, Adolescent Psychology and Tests and Measurements — all required

for teacher certification. Given the broad background I started with at Howard and continued at the Ph.D. level, I enlarged the scope of the offerings in psychology. This move was met with positive student response. I subsequently had similar experiences at Southern University and at Morgan State College (now university), where I was the only psychologist on the faculty teaching the required courses for teacher certification and the courses in the broadened curriculum.

In the summer of 1943, I received a letter that changed the direction of my professional life.

One of the outstanding names a student of psychology encountered in my student days, perhaps even today, was Rensis Likert, of the Likert-type scales for measuring attitudes. There were two rather unusual things about that letter. First, it asked if I would be interested in coming to Washington to discuss the possibility of a position as a psychologist in a research program headed by Likert. Second, it came from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Hence my query: What on earth did psychologists do in the U.S. Department of Agriculture — a branch of the federal government that was concerned with crops and livestock?

My immediate guess was that Likert had come across my name through my published work in psychological journals. I accepted the invitation to work with him in the Division of Program Surveys of Bureau of Agricultural Economics. This division was responsible for conducting psychological surveys on farmer attitudes toward government agricultural policies and programs. It was a new area for psychology — the application of psychological concepts and methods to the study of problems in policy development and program evaluation in an agency of the federal government.

I was given the title of "project director" and was responsible for developing, direct-

ing and reporting major research projects.

As it turned out, this strange new area of psychological research was not so strange after all. It drew upon concepts and methods in social psychology, attitude research, clinical psychology, experimental psychology (perception, memory, learning), statistics and research design that I learned at Howard.

In 1945, I went back to teaching (at Southern and Morgan State) until I was appointed to the faculty at Howard in 1947. I was "back home."

At Howard, a broad-based curriculum was already in place. There were a large number of psychology majors and sizeable groups of graduate students. And unlike the situation at other Black colleges, research by teachers was emphasized and expected. I felt quite comfortable with the atmosphere at Howard.

Meanwhile, Likert had gone to the University of Michigan where he established the Institute for Social Research. I was invited back to the Department of Agriculture by the new administrator of the division of Program Surveys to assist in a research project. This led to an arrangement that lasted for several years.

During my second affiliation with the Department of Agriculture, something that illustrates my theme of obtaining a broad-based undergraduate and graduate education occurred. Remember "psychophysics?" It came into play when the chairman of the Florida Citrus Commission presented this problem: Processed (canned, frozen) natural-flavor orange juice can vary from very tart or sour to very sweet. What sourness-sweetness level is most preferred by consumers? I spotted this immediately as a problem that is based in the concepts and methods of psychophysics. This problem and its obvious application to other food products led me to establish, in the Department of Agriculture, a Food Preference Research Laboratory. I also developed procedures for

large-scale food preference research projects (actually, large-scale psychophysical experiments). In appreciation of my work, the Department of Agriculture gave me a Superior Achievement Award.

My involvement in psychology as it applied to research on problems of policy and program evaluation brought me to the attention of individuals in the corporate world. Arnold King, president of National Analysts, Inc., a private research firm, offered me the position of vice president and director of research with his firm. Because I had no desire to leave permanently my teaching post at Howard, I took leave of absence to develop the company's research program. (National Analysts, Inc., is now a subsidiary of Booz, Allen and Hamilton).

Later, I was associated with Alfred Politz of New York, from 1962 to 1966, and the Chilton Company, a Philadelphia-based publisher of industrial magazines.

Beyond the Classroom

This recital of my experiences in the Department of Agriculture and the National Analysts, and Alfred Politz and Chilton seems to be a far cry from what I said was my commitment and expectation when I left Howard with the B.S. and M.S. degrees. My goal then was simply to spend my life as a teacher of psychology in a Black college, or colleges. Up to now, I just more or less mentioned the fact that I have taught at Virginia State, Southern, Morgan State and Howard. Also, I have cited projects I have done for government agencies and corporate enterprises. What about matters of special concern to Black people? Consider the following activities that I have been involved in over the years:

- Serving as an expert witness in school desegregation cases, and a job discrimination case for the NAACP and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Key cases here involved the desegregation of the Arlington, Alexandria and Roanoke school systems

after the period in Virginia known as "massive resistance."

- Conducting nationwide sessions in the desegregation of what was the most segregated activity in government — the federal and state agricultural extension system that involved every one of the approximately 3000 counties in the United States.

- Evaluating programs established by New York City, Atlanta and Washington, D.C., in their efforts to cope with inner-city problems. Examples of the programs evaluated are civilian police complaint review boards, summer youth programs, community relations commissions and civil rights commissions.

The most rewarding aspect of these 47 years as a psychologist, though, is the record number of students I can say I "touched."

I love teaching and working with students, especially during 40 years at Howard. The opening of the Ph.D. program in psychology several years ago added a new dimension to my teaching and my academically-based research.

This, then, is the story about the impact Howard University had on me. As I look back, I am constantly amazed at the numerous unanticipated paths that opened for me — paths that are characterized by a variety of activities. Today, as I approach my students, I am sharply conscious of the demand upon me to prepare them so that they will be equipped to take advantage of the unknown prospects that lie ahead. The details of these prospects cannot be anticipated. The only preparation is a broad-based one.

I am indebted to Howard for starting me on a direction that has been personally rewarding and productive. □

The above was excerpted from a presentation at the College of Liberal Arts' Honors Day Convocation.