

A Scientific Career of a Female Psychologist in the 20th Century:

Magda B. Arnold

Abstract

Magda B. Arnold was born in 1903 as Magda Barta-Blondiau in Moravská Třebová (Mährisch-Trübau), a small German-speaking enclave which today is part of the Czech Republic. Obviously, it had not been laid into Magda Arnold's cradle to pursue an academic career: She grew up as a fatherless child of an errant opera singer whom she barely knew. She was raised by two step-mothers under the most humble circumstances, without any chance of receiving a profound education. Against all odds, Magda Arnold became one of the most influential female psychologists of the 20th century: She developed new methodologies for assessing motivational concepts in a clinical setting, directed attention toward the cognitive processes determining emotional experiences, and studied the relation between memory and brain functions. Moreover, her scientific aspirations and achievements as a female psychologist are deeply interwoven with her personal life. The present paper analyzes these interconnections between her biography and her work in commemoration of her 120th birthday.

“Follow your attractions. Don't simply do what you think you should do. It's always the emotional attraction that will keep you persisting when things get rough.”

Magda B. Arnold

Magda B. Arnold's childhood in a German-speaking enclave in Moravská Třebová (Czech Republic) was characterized by severe poverty. Although she grew up within a highly anti-educational environment, she had been a bookworm from her early years on. Her step-mothers threatened the child that they would burn the books she borrowed from the local public library. Nevertheless, her personal vocation had been clear to her even as a teenage girl: “As a child, I have been reading virtually every book available in our public library”, she remarked in an interview. “When I was 16, I got hold of Freud's “Psychopathology of Everyday Life”, and at this point, I was absolutely fascinated and [...] I decided if I ever had the chance to become a psychologist, I would.” (interview by C. Roger Myers, April 2nd, 1976; cited as Arnold, 1976).



Figure 1: Magda Arnold

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During her teenage years, Magda Arnold became engaged in the youth movement ‘Wandervogel’, rooted in the ideals of German romanticism. To make a living for herself and – as we might call it nowadays – her ‘patchwork family’, Magda Arnold worked as a bank accountant in her hometown in Moravská Třebová. It is during this time that she met her later husband Robert Arnold, a student of Slavic languages at Charles University in Prague. After her marriage in 1926, she moved to Prague. She became fluent in Czech quickly and worked as a secretary and foreign language correspondent.

Magda Arnold firmly held true to her scientific aspirations even under these difficult circumstances: She secretly attended her first lectures in psychology at Charles University in Prague, as she was not allowed to enroll as an official student and had to steal away from office hours during her regular job assignments. Magda and Robert Arnold emigrated to Toronto, Canada, in 1928. Three daughters (Joan, Margaret, and Katherine) were born between 1929 and 1935.

In Toronto, Magda Arnold (then again in a language new to her) started studying psychology at a bachelor level in 1935. She was forced, she did so against the increasing and eventually decisive resistance of her husband. Eventually, she was forced to make a choice between conforming to his plans and run a farm outside of Toronto, or to pursue her academic interests. She made a choice in favor of academia, and it was only many years later that she was able to have good contact to her (then grown-up) daughters.

Despite deep and long-lasting feelings of grief due to the separation from her daughters, Magda Arnold’s scientific career unfolded at a rapid pace: She received her bachelor’s degree in 1938, and her master in psychology in 1940. She completed her dissertation only two years later, in 1942. Her first assignment at the University of Toronto followed immediately. This was fostered by the fact that many men served in the army during World War II, and a new legislation gave women the chance to attain academic positions – although these women were paid much less than their male colleagues. Upon the return of men after the end of the war, Arnold adopted a position at the Canadian Veterans Affairs Department – an experience (1946 – 1947) she characterized as a key element in her career. Here, she acquired a more applied perspective on psychology by exploring the possibilities to diagnose and treat the emotional suffering of war veterans.

The year 1947 was marked by yet another important decision in her life, again instigating a substantial move and cultural change. “I knew I’d just never get beyond an instructorship [in Toronto] and so what was the use ...” (Arnold, 1976, p. 39). As Rodkey (2006, p. 100) notes, this was “a correct assessment of the situation; no women were appointed in the department between 1947 and 1961” (see also de la Cour, 1987). After carefully weighing her options, Magda Arnold successfully applied for a position at Wellesley College (Massachusetts, USA); job options for an academic career were somewhat better at that time for female scientists in the US as compared to Canada. In the following years, and despite several highs and lows (including the recurring need to fight for adequate salary), Magda Arnold was affiliated to several renowned colleges and universities in the US, among them Bryn Mawr, Harvard, Wellesley, Johns-Hopkins-University in Baltimore and Loyola University in Chicago. The spectrum of her oeuvre is outstandingly multifold and gave directions to the psychology of the second half of the 20th century.

In her clinical work, Magda Arnold developed a systematic methodology for applying and analyzing the Thematic Apperception Test (e.g., Arnold, 1949; see also Arnold, 1962), introducing more specific categories of social interactions and allowing for comparisons between ‘normal’ and ‘neurotic’ patients.

Moreover, Magda Arnold is most widely recognized for her work on the nature of emotions, their antecedents, and their consequences for action. Her appraisal theory of emotions highlights the influence of perception and thinking on emotional experiences, thus emphasizing the control we can exert on our feelings and actions. According to Arnold (e.g., Arnold 1960), our perceptions and thoughts play a decisive role as to whether we feel anxious and hopeless, or whether we remain hopeful and maintain a drive for action. Her book on ‚Emotion and Personality‘ (Arnold, 1960) soon became a standard in the domain of emotion research and ensured her international recognition. In this vein, Magda Arnold provided the basis for the analysis of stress, coping with stress, and their effects on feeling and action. Thus, Richard Lazarus’ theory of coping and stress largely builds on the concepts developed by Magda Arnold (for a summary, see Lazarus, 1999). In a similar vein, Albert Ellis was inspired by her work in his development of Rational-Emotive Therapy, an important precursor of cognitive behavior therapy (e.g., Ellis, 1994).

Finally, Magda Arnold showed a persistent interest in the relation between the brain and memory, emphasizing the dynamic processes underlying memory functions. However, she was not able to conduct empirical research in this area. Rather, she relied on already published evidence, which is summarized in her book ‘Memory and the Brain’ (Arnold, 1984).

A quite complex aspect of her scientific endeavours is her conversion to catholicism. This ‘awakening experience’ was strongly influenced by her closest friend and collaborator for more than four decades, John A. Gasson, a Jesuit priest and professor of psychology at Spring Hill College, Alabama. Magda Arnold, who had been brought up in a way that caused her to consider herself as “eminently unlovable” (cf. Rodkey, 2016), must have found comfort both in her dear friendship and close collaboration with Gasson (e.g., Arnold & Gasson, 1954) as well as in catholic faith. Gasson brought her into contact with the ideas of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, a catholic philosopher and originator of a school of thought referred to as ‘Thomism’. Cornelius (2006) carefully explores the influence of these philosophers on Magda Arnold’s work.

Overall, the work of Magda Arnold is to be seen as one of the important starting points for the ‘cognitive turn’ in psychology: Until the 1960ies and 1970ies, only a strict methodological and conceptual focus on observable behavior had been regarded as respectable. From early on, Magda Arnold foresaw the end of this “atomistic psychology” – a term she used frequently when referring to the prevailing behavioristic approach to psychology (e.g., Arnold, 1942; Arnold & Gasson, 1954; Arnold, 1960; for a summary, see Shields, 2006). She explored the interplay between thinking, feeling, and acting, and most notably, she did so at a time when the methodologies for analyzing mental functions were far more limited as compared to nowadays. The concepts emerging from Magda Arnold’s tireless work are very much alive in modern theories of emotion (for an overview, see Reisenzein, 2006), as she contributed greatly to conceptual and methodological developments in the field of motivation and emotion (e.g., Arnold, 1962). At the same time, she acted as a bridgebuilder by initiating conferences and scientific organizations (e.g., Arnold, 1970). And finally, she sought contact to Russian psychology even at the high time of the Cold War.

Magda Arnold died at the age of 98 (on Oct 5th, 2002, in Tucson, Arizona), accompanied by her two surviving daughters, Joan and Margaret. Her life is an impressive example as to how deeply interwoven scientific ideas and personal life can get, and how many obstacles need to be surmounted as a female scientist. In her unpublished autobiography, she put it this way:

“Many times the changes in my life were fortunate only in hindsight, but very painful at the time” (c.f. Rodkey, 2015)

In her case, and in line with her conceptual analyses, perception and thinking surely have instigated hope and energetic action. Her publications are still cited in more than 1.000 scholarly articles per year.

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