



## TIME CAPSULE

---

# Notes on a scandal

**How a racy rumor about the father of behaviorism made its way into 200 psychology textbooks.**

By Jamie Chamberlin

October 2012, Vol 43, No. 9

Print version: page 20

In January 1920, not long after John B. Watson published his emotion-conditioning research on Little Albert, Johns Hopkins University gave the superstar professor a 50 percent salary hike to ensure he stayed at the university. But by the end of that year, the father of behaviorism and former APA president was fighting to keep his job there.

Almost overnight, Watson became the Tiger Woods of his day, "on the losing end of a scandalous divorce that garnered newspaper coverage across the United States, including publication of excerpts of love letters to the 'other woman,'" according to a 2007 *American Psychologist* article on Watson's departure from Johns Hopkins. It was written by psychology historian Ludy Benjamin, PhD, a professor emeritus at Texas A&M University.

That other woman was Rosalie Rayner, the 21-year-old graduate student who assisted Watson with his controversial Little Albert work. Watson's divorce was front-page news. His wife, Mary Ickes Watson, hailed from a prominent Baltimore political family. Mary's brother, Harold Ickes, was a notable figure in national politics and became secretary of the interior in 1932 for President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Johns Hopkins fired Watson for the public indiscretion, perhaps because the school had recently terminated another Hopkins professor linked to a prostitution raid, posits Benjamin.

Unable to find another job in academe, Watson moved to New York City to work at the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson and never returned to academia.

Decades later, a spicy rumor spread, offering a different reason for Watson's academic dismissal—that Johns Hopkins discovered he had been conducting sex research. The story was published as fact in at least 200 psychology textbooks between 1974–94, according to the AP article.

Where did the story start? Records indicate it originated with psychologist James Vernon McConnell (1925–90), best known for his non-replicable research on memory transfer in planarians.

"Why would a mere divorce," McConnell wrote in a 1979 journal article, "cause a man of Watson's stature to be fired?"

## Pass it on

Even as a graduate student at the University of Texas in the 1940s, McConnell was convinced there was more to Watson's firing. In the late 1950s, he got the "proof" he was looking for when he interviewed advertising executive and Watson colleague Deke Coleman, who told him Watson was fired not only for the divorce, but because he and Rayner were measuring their physiological responses during sex in Watson's lab at Johns Hopkins.

McConnell—who later claimed that he had heard the same story from one of his professors—included the information in the first edition of his 1974 textbook, "Understanding Human Behavior: An Introduction to Psychology." McConnell wrote that Watson pioneered psychology's interest in human sexuality.

"John B. Watson was one of the first Americans to investigate the physiological aspects of the sexual response," he wrote. "Watson wanted to know what kinds of biological changes occurred in humans during the stress of intercourse. Watson tackled

the issue directly, by connecting his own body (and that of his female partner) to various scientific instruments while they made love."

Although the evidence for such research was slim, the story attracted widespread attention. All of the major players were dead—Rayner in 1935, Watson in 1958 and Coleman in 1970—so professors throughout the United States wrote to McConnell asking for his evidence. One such correspondent was British psychologist Robert Boakes, who was writing a book on the history of animal behavior. In response to Boakes's letter, McConnell replied, "I will give you the facts as best I can. ... Watson—always adventuresome—realized that we knew little about human physiological reactions during sexual intercourse. Perhaps he used this as a reason, perhaps as an excuse, for an affair with Rayner. At one point (about 1917 or 1918), they made love in Watson's laboratory, having first hooked their bodies up to various recording devices. ... I gather that they generated a fair amount of data. Watson's wife discovered the affair and, so Coleman told me, confiscated the data as 'evidence' for a divorce."

Yet records indicate that Rayner, who married Watson after his divorce, didn't meet or start working with Watson until 1919, according to the AP article.

In response to another letter asking for evidence from Watson scholar Cedric Larson, McConnell replied, "Watson was a brilliant innovator, and he surely had the equipment around (or could have rigged it) had he wished to do so. The newspaper coverage [of the affair and the divorce] was scandalous, in all senses of the word. I can't imagine that an ordinary case of infidelity would have caused quite that much sensation. ... I suppose my feeling is that Watson was so bright that he should have made the recordings even if he didn't."

## Sex sells

It wasn't until 2001 that the story was seriously investigated. That's when Benjamin began his probe, eventually working with three graduate students to trace the story through introductory and history textbooks, the Watsons' divorce record and the correspondence of Watson, Larson, McConnell and others. The research team found that the story stretched and changed, with other versions alleging that Watson and Rayner used a kymograph measuring device during intercourse. McConnell claimed that there was a photo of the instruments Watson used for the sex research. But Benjamin, who traveled to both Hopkins and the Canadian Psychological Association museum where they supposedly hailed from, found no evidence that the instruments existed or had ties to Watson.

At least one textbook regarded the sex research story as gossip, the AP authors found. In the third version of his "History of Psychology" text, psychologist David Hothersall wrote: "A careful examination of Watson's dismissal and divorce convinced a recent biographer of Watson that there is no evidence that he was dismissed because of alleged experiments concerned with human sexual behavior." Hothersall omitted the story entirely from his text's 2004 fourth edition, as did most other authors by that time.

How did a rumor become textbook fodder? "Nothing really sells like sex," posits Jodi Whitaker, of The Ohio State University, one of Benjamin's co-authors. "It was a wonderfully salacious story to spread around."

McConnell, who kept the Watson story in all eight versions of his textbook, between 1974 and 1994 (the last version was published after his death), likely fell prey to thinking about the past through present-day attitudes, says Benjamin. "Sexual affairs appeared more common in [McConnell's] time and they didn't seem to have the consequence of the Watson affair," he says.

It probably didn't help that Watson—voted "handsomest professor" in 1919 at Johns Hopkins—had the movie-star looks people wanted to associate with sexual experimentation, says Benjamin. Watson's outspoken interest in sex may also have fueled the rumor. He had also spoken about his professional curiosity in sex at an address at Columbia University in 1913, and wrote several popular-press articles about human sexuality when he worked in advertising. One historian, John Burnham, who interviewed Watson, his family and his colleagues, wrote, "each time that I tried to find out about his work in psychology ... what I heard about instead was some woman with whom he supposedly went to bed."

And while historical evidence indicates that Watson didn't conduct sex research and modern textbooks have omitted the story, Benjamin finds that colleagues still write to him saying that they have seen the story mentioned or heard about it in a lecture.

"It's hard to make myths die," Benjamin says.

As for Watson, he devoted his scientific training to advertising; he is credited with coining innovations we use even today, such as the term "coffee break" for a Maxwell House campaign. In spite of the gossip, his exit from academic psychology marked an important shift in the field, says Benjamin.

"Watson was at the height of his fame, and behaviorism, the brand of psychology that he promoted, was beginning to dominate psychology," says Benjamin. "[Psychology] almost certainly developed differently without his dynamic presence."

---

*Katharine S. Milar, PhD, of Earlham College, is historical editor for "Time Capsule."*

---

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/10/scandal.aspx>