
Reevaluating Named Awards

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In the wake of political turmoil and calls by many to reevaluate policing strategies and redouble social justice efforts, Division 19 made a public statement standing against racism in all forms and specifically condemned the “repeated killing of unarmed Black People and other People of Color” (see <https://www.militarypsych.org/division-19-stands-against-racism/>). During this time, the Division also was contacted by two previous recipients of what then was called the Robert M. Yerkes Award for significant contributions to military psychology by a non-psychologist. These past recipients raised concerns about being affiliated with Yerkes, calling on the Division to take a closer look at its named awards. The Division answered the call by committing to investigating all named awards, and devising a procedural approach to naming future awards. After extensive evaluation, the sole name to be removed from awards was Yerkes, due in large part, though not solely, to his association with the eugenics movement.

The award for significant contributions to military psychology by a non-psychologist was first established in 1986 and awarded to Senator Daniel Inouye for his contributions to military psychology. The following year, this award was named after Robert Yerkes and awarded to Craig Alderman, then Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. The award has been given to many American heroes, for example, Elizabeth Dole for her work with the Red Cross and General Maxwell Thurman for his work in advancing technology research in military medicine. Another recent recipient was director and producer David Cohen for his work on the war documentary *Restrepo*. Suffice to say, the award provides a running list of amazing contributors to Military Psychology from outside the profession. As Gade (2021) stated, however, “It seems a bit odd that Yerkes’ name would be attached to an award for contributions to military psychology by non-psychologists” (p.15), given that Yerkes was a psychologist and is widely considered the father of military psychology.

Robert Yerkes graduated from Harvard in 1902 under the guidance of Josiah Royce and Hugo Münsterberg with an emphasis on animal psychology (Hilgard, 1965). He taught at Harvard from 1902 to 1917, rising to the status of assistant professor of comparative psychology. It was during Yerkes’ tenure as APA president in 1917 that the United States entered WWI. Yerkes organized and led a team of uniformed military psychologists in the construction of the US Army Alpha and Beta tests—the first large-scale application of psychological testing for selection purposes. After his time in the Army, Yerkes taught

at Yale from 1924 until granted emeritus status in 1944, where his work largely focused on primatology (Hilgard, 1965). His viewpoints on intelligence are best represented in two articles: “Eugenic Bearing of Measurements of Intelligence in the United States Army” (Yerkes, 1923a) and “Testing the Human Mind” (Yerkes, 1923b).

In order to apply a historical lens (as opposed to a modernistic one) to the Yerkes debate, it is imperative that we contextually frame eugenics. Eugenics, during its time, was the province of forward-thinking individuals committed to promoting social reform. Eugenicists frequently supported such humanitarian efforts as education for people with cognitive disabilities and deferment from the penal system to treatment while simultaneously calling for their colonization, sterilization, and segregation (Goddard, 1915). Indeed, it is difficult to find historical figures that fit squarely into a category of hero or villain. As such, it is not surprising that we still struggle recognizing early luminaries of the field of psychology that were also flawed in their promotion of what we view as heinous treatment of people with intellectual disabilities by today’s standards. Yerkes is no exception.

Robert Yerkes’ involvement with Eugenics is well documented and he has been criticized for his contributions to the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 (see Gould, 1981; Sheppard, 2020). It is notable that some scholars have contested Yerkes’ specific contributions to the controversial law (see Snyderman, & Herrnstein, 1983; Franco, 1985). Yerkes undoubtedly viewed immigration to be an important consideration for Americans, and he viewed intelligence as a central consideration to inform such policies. Yerkes (1923b) cites his colleague Brigham’s conclusion that the “marked diminution of intelligence” among immigrants was due to an increasing number of Southern Europeans as compared to favored Northern Europeans immigration to the United States. It is worth noting that during Brigham is discussing genetically based intelligence of groups (i.e., he is viewing nations through the lens of race). In this context, Nordic, Alpine, and Mediterranean are races of White people. Yerkes builds off the assertions of Brigham concluding that reduced intelligence among immigrants was “because of the dominance of the Mediterranean races, as contrasted with the Nordic and Alpine” which were viewed as genetically more favorable immigrants as substantiated by his own measurements of verbal and nonverbal intelligence. He then goes on to explain that,

“It might almost be said that whoever desires high taxes, full almshouses, a constantly increasing number of schools for defectives, of correctional institutions, penitentiaries, hospitals, and special classes in our public schools, should by all means work for unrestricted and non-selective immigration.” Yerkes, [1923b](#), p.365.

As was common for the time, Yerkes misattributed low intelligence solely to genetics without consideration of environmental factors such as socioeconomic status and education opportunities. While in modern times we consider these errors, Yerkes and others of his time did not. Regardless, Yerkes’ and other scholars’ work were used and/or misused by lawmakers which prompted the forced sterilization and segregation of those viewed as “feeble-minded,” which disproportionately impacted individuals from historically marginalized groups (Bruinius, [2007](#); Crocket, [2013](#)).

Yerkes’ evidently eugenic and racially biased interpretation between Black recruits from the north and Black recruits from the south which he saw as a genetic difference (Yerkes, [1921](#)) impacted psychology for decades (see Klineberg, [1935](#)). Specifically, Yerkes attributed the higher intelligence scores of northern Black recruits as compared to southern Black recruits to the Selective Migration Hypothesis. This hypothesis posited that more intelligent Black Americans migrated north leaving behind less intelligent Black people in the south. It took more than 15 years for Klineberg (1935) to disprove this assumption. To add context, it may be beneficial for readers to remember that during that time race was not considered a social construct as it is today but rather another facet of genetics. Yerkes attributed the differences between White recruits’ intelligence scores to greater educational opportunities in the northern United States. In sum, Yerkes attributed differences between northern and southern Black recruits to genetics while explaining the difference in White recruits as a result of environmental differences. To further illustrate the power of the zeitgeist of his time, Yerkes may have completely overlooked the fact that northern Black recruits outperformed southern White recruits on intelligence tests, as there are no known instances of him offering an explanation for these results.

In early December of 2019, the Society received the letter from previous award recipients calling for the removal of Yerkes’ name from awards. On August 08, 2020 the Society chartered a plan to create a taskforce, with the explicit instruction to (a) create and implement a systematic approach to evaluate all named awards and, (b) create a process by which to name future awards. By December 22, 2020 a taskforce consisting of 11 members was assembled, and led by two executive committee members. The committee was organized into three taskforce teams were made up of three to four members including students, early, middle, and senior career professionals, with an additional member hand-selected by the Diversity Committee. The taskforce members represented a wide range of backgrounds in psychological science, and were asked to present their recommendations to the Executive

Committee for final approval.

The rules for engagement were established before diving into the literature. Members agreed that primary sourced documents would be given more weight as evidence of whether to change the Yerkes award name. Additionally, taskforce members agreed that all interactions should be respectful and individuals should focus on content above delivery. One question the teams wrestled with most was establishing a threshold of wrongdoing for removing the name and deciding whether to include private behaviors (i.e., membership in a eugenics society) as opposed to solely public ones such as publications or using one’s position to promote eugenics.

Division 19 is neither the first nor the last to reconsider after whom awards are named after. Law professor George Shepherd (2020) established a set of standards for when to remove a person’s name from monuments. Ironically, Shepherd applied the standards to a primate research center named after Robert Yerkes. Shepherd recommends evaluating the namesake based on their respective (a) contribution to science, (b) the namesake’s harm caused, (c) the historical context of the behaviors, and (d) when the monument was named. He then recommends that if the decision is to retain the name, additional information should be provided explaining the controversial conduct and its context. Shepherd (2020) makes a strong argument for removing Yerkes’ name from the primate center but solely considered Yerkes’ work in primatology. In order for the Society to apply Shepard’s standards it is central to consider Yerkes’ work during WWI with the Army Alpha/Beta alongside other notable military psychologists such as Lewis Terman and Eugene C. Rowe.

While the ultimate decision was to remove Yerkes’ name from the award, not everyone agreed with the decision. What everyone interviewed did agree on was that such a decision could not be made without considering all perspectives especially given Yerkes’ critical involvement in the establishment of Military Psychology as a profession. Those who wished to retain the namesake posited that while Yerkes was a member of multiple eugenics societies, it was difficult if not impossible to prove to what degree he participated. At the time, eugenics was widely accepted by many prominent psychologists, including presidents of the American Psychological Association. One can only speculate that a psychologist would find it difficult to rise to such a position while holding a controversial perspective. Another point made was that Yerkes should not be held responsible for how the data for the Army Alpha test was used or interpreted. Instead, they empathized with a fellow social scientist wanting others to use his dataset to make empirically informed decisions. Citing Snyderman & Herrnstein ([1983](#)), one participant highlighted that it is difficult if not impossible to demonstrate a causal relationship between Yerkes’ dataset and that the infamous 1924 Immigration Act for which Yerkes is often criticized. Indeed, the data collected by Yerkes is only cited on one page out of the 800 pages of Congressional testimony collected before this act was passed by lawmakers.

Those in the majority who wanted to remove Yerkes' name from the award had a different perspective. They highlighted that Yerkes was not only responsible for how his dataset was used, they posited that he used his position as a scientist and leader to promote eugenic ideology on a national level during his foreword written for Brigham (1923). They pointed to Yerkes' own words to formulate their opinion citing the 1923a paper to do so.

“Far more interesting doubtless to the practical eugenicist than occupational differences in intelligence or specifications are the racial differences which appear when the foreign-born American draft is analyzed into its principal constituent groups. The difference even of median score or letter grade distribution are so great as to be significant alike to the American people and to the eugenicists of the world.

“The contrasting intellectual status of the white versus the negro constituents of the draft appear from table 8. Few residents of the United States probably would have anticipated so great a difference. That the American negro is 90 per cent. illiterate only in part accounts for his inferior intellectual status.” (p. 241)

Given that Yerkes never recanted the Army Alpha conclusions while other prominent eugenicists did (see Brigham, 1930), certain members of the committee presumed that Yerkes likely held these ideals until his death. While they agreed that Yerkes' contributions to military psychology should not be dismissed, his public and perhaps private opinions about eugenics are incompatible with the Division's mission and trajectory. Because of these reasons they argued, his namesake should be removed from the award.

How did the taskforce navigate conflict? It would seem that with such a wide chasm of differing opinions navigating conflict would be difficult. Simply put, the taskforce was up to the challenge. Due to the EXCOM's foresight and a heavy dose of mutual respect among members, the taskforce approached the academic debate appropriately. Based on most interviews, taskforce teams proactively forecasted preventable problems, held open and explicit discussions about team expectations and goals, and during conflict tended to focus more on content as opposed to delivery. Taken together the teams would best be categorized as “Ideal” (Behfar et al., 2008). These teams are generally willing to identify and correct problems proactively and prevent many negative effects of conflict on group production.

In order to promote debate, taskforce groups made a concerted effort to hear from everyone. Multiple meetings were held virtually with the explicit expectation that members would read Yerkes' work, formulate their opinions, then return to the group and share what they found. More than six virtual meetings in addition to other electronic communication provided what most participants viewed as ample opportunities to opine. This perspective varied based on whether the member was part of the majority or minority opinion. Those with the minority opinion to retain the name noted that at times they felt that

their contributions were discounted. Additionally, not everyone felt comfortable discussing their reservations to changing the name given the context of current events. They feared that the decision to move away from the name may have been shaped by a more modern lens, as opposed to viewing Yerkes' in the context of his own time. Interestingly, one contributor in the majority opinion identified at least one of their group members that provided strong counter-arguments. The contributor expressed gratitude for those taking on the important task of providing strong counter-arguments which has been shown to guard against group-think (Akhmad, Chang, Hiroshi, & Deguchi, 2021). At the end of the day, the Society offered multiple avenues for debate which also included social media utilization in an effort to promote commentary by Division 19 members not affiliated with the taskforce.

While most taskforce members interviewed agreed that the process was good overall, it was not perfect. Whenever a group is tasked to navigate controversial topics group members may be tempted to withhold their opinions especially if they expect them to be poorly received by others. One way to circumvent this issue is to offer a way for members to provide their opinion anonymously. Once received, group members could read the feedback and discuss the merits and limitations as a team. Unfortunately, if group members have follow-up questions it would be difficult to answer questions and maintain anonymity. As a second option, it may be beneficial for future taskforce groups to formally assign the role of debating for and against the decision that is being proposed. Hesitant group members may be more apt to submit challenging opinions to someone who has been formally charged to offer the best argument for a minority, contrary, or controversial position. As a final note, it would be abundantly helpful to record the strongest arguments on all sides to demonstrate what was considered when finalizing a recommendation from the group.

Being a trans-national organization comprised entirely of volunteers may limit the practicality of meeting in person. However, following the pandemic people are finding new and innovative ways of utilizing virtual meeting spaces. Identifying favored platforms that provide a more immersive environment may lead to more engagement from group members who are simultaneously navigating busy lives. Those who miss meetings may benefit from having a brief, written summary of the meeting sent to them in order to promote continued engagement. Finally, if the taskforce requires significant reading, creating summaries of reading materials to share with others would provide an opportunity for time-pressed members to benefit from the time spent by others. As a bonus, citing the source materials and page numbers would provide a means of targeted readings that more closely pertain to the task at hand.

Division 19's approach to navigating criticism and potential controversy provides an excellent example to other organizations met with similar challenges. The Society organized a group of dedicated and competent psychologists whose ultimate recommendation is only a part of the greater story. Taskforce members who were interviewed recognized the importance of having award names that

are consistent with Society values without dismissing the important historical contributions made by Yerkes to the profession of military psychology. Their commitment to equality, fairness, and the profession are a testament to the outstanding community we are all a part of. As an all-volunteer organization it is incredibly important that we are grateful for the contributions made by our members. If you would like to participate in future taskforce groups or are looking for a way to become more active in the Society, please reach out to the Division 19 President or the Committee Chairs listed in this issue!

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