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# John B. Watson's Alleged Sex Research

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## *An Appraisal of the Evidence*

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*In 1974, a story was published about clandestine research done by John B. Watson that was judged to be so reprehensible that it was offered as the real reason he was fired from his faculty position at Johns Hopkins University in 1920, at perhaps the peak of his academic career. Watson's dismissal from Johns Hopkins may have been the most important event in his career, and it almost certainly altered the history of American psychology. Thus, this story has great significance. The claims of the story, however, have never been validated or invalidated. This article examines the evidence for and against the existence of such research and discusses Watson's academic dismissal in light of that evidence.*

**Keywords:** John Watson, James McConnell, sex research, Rosalie Rayner, history of psychology

**F**or more than 50 years, John Broadus Watson (1878–1958) has been acknowledged as one of the most significant figures in the history of American psychology (see Bergmann, 1956; Buckley, 1989). He was the most influential psychologist of his time. His philosophy of behaviorism dominated American psychology for 50 years and continues to be important today, albeit in a cognitively altered form. In 1974, a story surfaced about some of Watson's research that was judged to be so morally reprehensible that it was suggested to be the real reason that Watson was dismissed from Johns Hopkins University in 1920. Was this research the reason for his dismissal? Did he even conduct this research? Such claims have been made but never validated or invalidated. The purpose of this article is to review the evidence on both sides and, thus, to provide a more accurate account of a pivotal event that dramatically altered Watson's life and career and, very likely, psychology's history.

In January 1920, Watson celebrated his 42nd birthday. The year had a promising start. He had published the results from a study in his infant research laboratory at Johns Hopkins that demonstrated how Pavlovian conditioning could be used to produce fear in a human. Watson conditioned 11-month-old Albert B. to fear a white rat where no fear had existed before (Watson & Rayner, 1920). He fully understood the importance of that research for behavioristic psychology and recognized that it would add to his already considerable status in the field of psychology.

Johns Hopkins University president Frank Goodnow, who worried that he might lose his psychology superstar to a rival university, gave Watson a 50% raise in salary and told Watson how pleased he was with his work (Pauly, 1979). Only a few months later, however, Watson's world was turned upside down. He was on the losing end of a scandalous divorce that garnered newspaper coverage across the United States, including publication of excerpts of his love letters to the "other woman." The scandal was so great that Goodnow saw no other recourse than to demand Watson's resignation, an action approved by the senior faculty at Johns Hopkins (Buckley, 1989; Pauly, 1979).

Watson sought other academic positions, but none was forthcoming. No university would hire the creative and controversial psychologist who seven years earlier had launched the behavioristic movement. In his call to arms for psychological science, Watson (1913b) demanded a break with the philosophy of the past, rejected the method of introspection, and insisted that mental events were beyond the pale of scientific psychology. No university would hire this man who five years earlier had been president of his national association. Abandoned by most of his academic colleagues, Watson joined the world of business and spent the rest of his career working in the field of advertising.

The other woman in Watson's life in 1920 was Rosalie Rayner, a 21-year-old graduate student who had assisted Watson on the research with the infant Albert B. Rayner (1899–1935) came from a prominent Baltimore family. But if Rayner's family was prominent, the family of

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Mary Ickes, Watson's wife, was even more so. Mary Ickes had met her husband-to-be when she was an undergraduate in one of his classes at the University of Chicago. Her brother Harold, a lawyer, had vehemently opposed the marriage of his sister to someone so clearly below her social station, the son of an alcoholic ne'er-do-well from rural South Carolina. At the time of his sister's divorce in 1920, Harold Ickes had been part of national politics for almost a decade, having worked on the 1912 presidential campaign of Theodore Roosevelt. When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1932, Harold Ickes became his Secretary of the Interior and would serve in Roosevelt's cabinet throughout his four terms. The prominence of the families involved and the salaciousness of the love triangle, so boldly exposed in the newspapers, were more than enough to create a scandalous divorce.

From a contemporary standpoint, one might wonder about Watson's loss of his academic career. How could such a prominent academic psychologist lose his university post for having sexual relations with one of his students? Such affairs, which surely violate the ethical codes of most, if not all, universities, are probably not uncommon in academia today, and it is likely that they were not so uncommon in Watson's day either. This question was asked by psychologist James Vernon McConnell (1925–1990) when he was a student in the late 1940s. Seeking an answer, he reasoned that there had to be more to the story than just an affair: "Why would a mere divorce," he asked, "cause a man of Watson's stature to be fired?" (McConnell, 1979, p. 1). In the late 1950s, McConnell met Deke Coleman, who had worked with Watson in the advertising business in New York City and who ultimately provided McConnell with an explanation to satisfy his presentist thinking.

According to Coleman, the "unspoken secret of the divorce" (McConnell, 1985b, p. 685) was that Watson had been conducting studies of actual sexual intercourse, measuring physiological responses during the sexual act. Coleman claimed that Watson conducted these studies using himself and his graduate assistant, Rayner, as the participants. Coleman also stated that Watson had been fired for these studies, not just for having an affair with his graduate student. For McConnell, Coleman's account finally explained the real reason behind Watson's harsh dismissal.

McConnell accepted Coleman's tales wholly, although no such stories existed in any of the extant scholarship on Watson at the time. He felt confident enough about his informant's anecdotes that he included the story in the first edition of his 1974 introductory psychology textbook, *Understanding Human Behavior: An Introduction to Psychology* (McConnell, 1974). The story appeared in the chapter on motivation, and McConnell claimed that Watson had pioneered psychology's interest in human sexuality. He wrote,

A few scientists did attempt to bring human sexual behavior into the laboratory, to study it [objectively]. . . . John B. Watson . . . was one of the first Americans to investigate the physiological

aspects of the sexual response. . . . Since the medical sciences had studiously ignored the subject, Watson set out to investigate the matter himself—at first hand.

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. He fathered what were probably the very first reliable data on the human sexual response and, since it was a subject he could obviously study with pleasure, he acquired several boxes of carefully annotated records. Unfortunately for all concerned, his wife (who had refused to participate in such an outrageous undertaking) eventually discovered why her husband was spending so much time with his female assistant in his laboratory. Watson's wife not only sued him for divorce, she also confiscated the scientific records! (McConnell, 1974, pp. 344–345)

Thus, a startling assertion about Watson's research on human sexual behavior, based on a 20-year-old memory, was made to justify the divorce and to stake a claim for Watson's priority as a researcher on the physiology of human sexual behavior. Moreover, the story was told without a single reference to its source.

## Reactions to McConnell's Story

McConnell's story attracted widespread attention. It was a story about one of the most colorful and important figures in the history of American psychology. It was about sexual misconduct, always a subject of interest, if not titillation. And it was a new anecdote to add to the many tales about Watson. A few years after publishing the Watson story, McConnell began receiving letters from professors in the United States and abroad. The letters were a mixture of surprise, skepticism, and ire at what some considered irresponsibility in publishing such a story with no apparent evidence to support it.

Robert Boakes, a psychologist in England who was doing research for his book on the history of animal behavior, was among the first to write to McConnell asking about the sex research and McConnell's sources. McConnell (1977b) replied,

To tell the truth, I am not surprised that you are having difficulties finding out what happened to poor old John Watson in Baltimore. I was blessed by fortunate circumstances, or I'd never have gotten on to the subject. My mentor was Karl Dallenbach, who mentioned the story to me casually in the early 1950's as an amusing anecdote (he may have told the story in class; I can't really remember). Then it was also my good fortune to become friends with Deke Coleman, an American who came close to finishing his Ph.D. at Cornell about 1920 but who quit and went into advertising instead, ending up as Managing Director of the J. Walter Thompson organization in Australia. Deke worked at J. Walter Thompson in New York City at the time that they hired Watson (about 1921, I believe). . . . I will give 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 Raynor [sic]. At one point (about 1917 or 1918), they made love in Watson's laboratory, having first hooked their bodies up to various recording devices (GSR [galvanic skin response] among other things). 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. Watson was said to have agreed to the divorce with the proviso that the data be returned (Coleman said it [sic] wasn't). (p. 1)

There were some points of his story that McConnell could have checked but evidently did not. For example, Watson and Rayner would not have had sex with each other in 1917 or 1918, because she did not arrive at Johns Hopkins until 1919.

Boakes (1977) was not satisfied with the account and wondered if Coleman or McConnell had mistaken Mary Ickes Watson's confiscation of the love letters between Watson and Rayner for the alleged confiscation of the sex data. He wrote to McConnell, stating,

On balance my conclusion from your letter is that Watson was never engaged in any kind of sex research. . . . The strongest evidence for this I find in Watson's own writing: he drops broad hints about various aspects of his life all over the place, but never a hint of this. (p. 1)

Consequently, Boakes decided against any mention of the story in his published account of Watson's career (see Boakes, 1984).

When McConnell's story appeared, Cedric Larson, a leading authority on Watson, was working on a Watson biography. The tale did not mesh with his own research of nearly 20 years on Watson, and so Larson, ever the diplomat, wrote to McConnell:

While I have a good deal of material on Watson's divorce, I was not aware of the data you presented in your second paragraph of "Watson's Physiological Studies." I have had personal interviews with three of the four Watson children (one now deceased) and talked to many of Watson's contemporaries. I tried to track down the case file of the divorce in the court where it was obtained in Baltimore, but the records apparently vanished without a trace. So I was wondering what your source might be. (Larson, 1977, p. 1)

McConnell (1977a) replied with essentially the same story he had related to Boakes, telling Larson that Boakes did not accept his evidence or arguments for Watson's sexual research. McConnell (1977a) added,

But the whole thing seemed logical to me. 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. (p. 2)

McConnell heard from others as well—historians of psychology, textbook writers, psychology instructors—who expressed skepticism about his story and/or wanted to know his source. For example, Robert Ammons (1982) wrote, "I find it to be a very interesting story, but not to square with the stories of persons present at Johns Hopkins at this time. . . . I would be very interested in any substantiation or documentation available for this story" (p. 1).

As noted earlier, McConnell (1985b) had written that he had pondered about Watson's dismissal from Johns

Hopkins since his graduate student years. He wrote, "Why all the fuss over something that was surely commonplace even in those days?" (p. 685). Then Coleman gave McConnell the reason he had been seeking. The fact that Watson's sex experiments were not widely known was evidently a shock to McConnell. Discussing the reactions to his publication of the story in 1974, McConnell (1985b) wrote,

Little did I anticipate the furor that particular passage in my book would create among Watson scholars! I had assumed, you see, that if Deke Coleman knew the "facts" about Watson's experiments on sex, most other psychologists of the time would know about them too. What a naïve assumption! (p. 685)

Despite the questions raised, including some from noted authorities on Watson, McConnell stuck to his story, even as his resolve and rationale seemed to weaken (e.g., "Well, if he didn't do the research, he should have" [paraphrasing McConnell's response to Boakes]).

## The Story Spreads

Psychology textbook authors are always looking for good stories that help bring their subjects to life. And sex and scandal make for interesting reading. So it was not surprising that other authors published McConnell's Watson story in their own texts. We have found versions of it in introductory psychology textbooks and history of psychology textbooks. One of the earliest examples in an introductory book used the story to label Watson as a pioneer in sexual research and to explain the demise of his academic career (Houston, Bee, & Rimm, 1983):

John B. Watson, famous for his work in other areas, was heavily condemned for his pioneer work in the field of sexual behavior during the first part of this century. He connected his body and the body of his partner to various recording instruments in order to measure their physiological reactions while they made love. Although his data are among the earliest reliable findings of this sort, Watson was driven from his academic position with his career in ruins. (p. 327)

McConnell's version said nothing about Watson being condemned for his work. Further, it is interesting that the authors remarked on the reliability of the data, something that McConnell mentioned, although in a more speculative way. Most of the introductory psychology textbook accounts were true to McConnell's version of the story (see Carlson, 1984, pp. 22–23; Price, Glickstein, Horton, & Bailey, 1982, p. 329).

The first history of psychology textbook to publish the account was the third edition of Duane Schultz's (1981) *A History of Modern Psychology*, a long-standing leader in the field. Schultz's account mirrored that of McConnell's, except for an additional sentence, typical of Schultz's wry sense of humor: "With a commitment to research worthy of any scientist, Watson himself served as one of his subjects" (p. 206).

Stories have a way of changing in the telling and retelling, and textbook accounts are known for frequent additions or distortions (see Ben Harris's, 1979, account of various portrayals of Watson's little Albert study). One

history of psychology textbook (Stagner, 1988) indicated that the physiological data from the Watson–Rayner coupling were “recorded on kymographic tape” and that after the divorce, Mary Ickes Watson “burned the records” (p. 174). Neither “fact” comes from McConnell. Although Stagner referenced McConnell (1983), that account contained no such information. Stagner wrote to McConnell in 1985:

Years ago when I used your introductory text, I and the students were highly amused by the anecdote . . . about Mrs. John B. Watson burning the kymograph records of John and Rosalie at play. Regrettably, my copy has disappeared and so, it seems, has that in the [Wayne State University] Library. (Stagner, 1985, p. 1)

McConnell (1985a) provided Stagner with an account of the story and added that “it’s not entirely clear that John B. actually used a kymograph, but perhaps that was the case” (p. 1). Stagner’s statement that Mary Ickes Watson burned the records is not found in any other account. Perhaps he confused the fact that Watson was known to have burned his correspondence and other papers toward the end of his life (Buckley, 1989) with Watson’s wife burning the sex research records. The memory for the kymograph comes from another source (Magoun, 1981) to be discussed later.

One other history of psychology textbook showed awareness of McConnell’s Watson story. In the first and second editions of Hothersall’s (1984, p. 347; 1990) text, he wrote that “even today the circumstances surrounding Watson’s dismissal and divorce continue to produce gossip and scandal.” For that statement, he referenced the third edition of McConnell’s (1980) textbook, but he did not repeat the story in either edition. Perhaps, as his sentence indicates, he considered the account gossip. It is interesting that he did include the full story in his third edition in 1995 (Hothersall, 1995). He followed it, however, with this disclaimer:

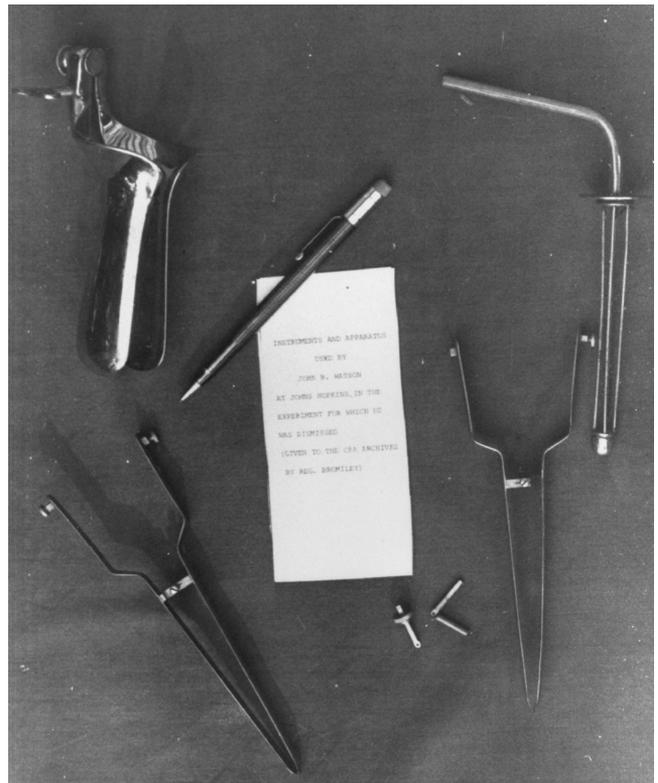
McConnell’s account makes a wonderfully salacious story. But a careful examination of Watson’s dismissal and divorce convinced a recent biographer of Watson [Kerry Buckley] that there is no evidence that he was dismissed because of alleged experiments concerned with human sexual behavior. (Hothersall, 1995, p. 465)

Hothersall (2004) dropped the story entirely in the next edition of his book.

## The Discovery of the Sex Instruments

In an effort to confirm or disconfirm McConnell’s story, Larson contacted some of the many sources he had used in gathering information for his anticipated biography on Watson. He also sought to learn what he could about Coleman. According to McConnell (1985b), in the summer of 1978, Larson “discovered that some equipment from Watson’s laboratory had wound up in the museum of the Canadian Psychological Association [CPA]” (p. 686). The equipment was described as “a set of small instruments for measuring the female sexual response” (p. 686). These four instruments, two of which are duplicates, are shown in Figure 1. At the time of Larson’s discovery, the instruments were housed with the CPA, and he was notified of their existence by C. Roger Myers, historian and archivist for

**Figure 1**  
*Instruments That John Watson Was Alleged to Have Used in His Studies of Human Sexual Intercourse*



*Note.* The label in the photograph reads “Instruments and apparatus used by John B. Watson at Johns Hopkins in the experiment for which he was dismissed (Given to the CPA [Canadian Psychological Association] Archives by Reg. Bromiley).” From the Papers of Cedric Larson in the Archives of the History of American Psychology, University of Akron. Reprinted with permission.

CPA. Recent efforts to locate those instruments have been unsuccessful, either with the CPA or with the CPA Archives. The CPA archivist, Katalin Dzinan, despite an exhaustive search, has been unable to find the instruments or to locate any official inventory that shows that the instruments are or were part of the CPA collection (K. Dzinan, personal communications, November 29, 2005 and May 1, 2006).

When Larson received the photograph, he sent a copy of it to Gordon Derner at Adelphi University, because he had heard Derner speak on human sexual behavior and believed that Derner could assist with the identification of the instruments. Derner (1979) identified one of the instruments as a “speculum which is used to spread the vaginal walls for a gynecological examination” (p. 1), but he was unable to identify the other instruments pictured. So how did the CPA Archives acquire these instruments and how was their linkage to Watson established? Some details were provided by Magoun (1981).

Magoun’s (1981) article, inspired by McConnell’s story, related the contents of two letters from Reginald

Bromiley, a Canadian psychologist, to Magoun in 1978 and 1979. Bromiley said that he first saw the instruments at Johns Hopkins in 1936 when he was a graduate student there: "In the spring of 1936, Roy Dorcus . . . showed me a cigar box with four bits of equipment which he stated were Watson's" (as cited in Magoun, 1981, p. 371). Bromiley returned to Johns Hopkins in 1945 after service with the Canadian Army in World War II. In a conversation with Eliot Stellar, he learned that a storeroom of old laboratory equipment was about to be thrown away. Stellar took him to the room and while rummaging amidst the equipment, Bromiley found the cigar box containing the instruments. He kept it and years later donated the instruments to the CPA Archives. Bromiley described the instruments as follows (see Figure 1):

A simple vaginal speculum [upper left] such as obstetricians use. One device [upper right] was obviously a tambour sensor which would transmit (intravaginal) pressure changes in (an inflated) condom, to be recorded via a manometer. The duplicated second devices [bottom] were a pair of contacts designed to be inserted into a lacuna to count contractions. (Magoun, 1981, p. 371)

Magoun had the photo of the instruments examined by Berry Campbell, an expert on polygraph techniques used in measuring human sexual response. Campbell agreed on the identification of the speculum and on the tambour that was likely placed in the vagina. About the other two instruments he wrote:

At first sight they appear to be electrical apparatus of some sort but, if they go back to 1920, that is unlikely. And they are not insulated. . . . I would guess that a small balloon was placed between the wide limbs and the narrow limbs held some contractile tissue in a forceps-like hold—the signal being relayed to the balloon via the leverage system and from the balloon to the writing arm, by narrow tubing and a tambour with a scribing straw cemented to it. . . . Going back to the photo, the knobs which look like electrical connections may well have held rubber bands, constraining the small balloon. The pincer-like gadget could pick up contractions which occur during orgasm in the small labia or from the clitoris itself. (Magoun, 1981, pp. 371–372)

Campbell noted that the contractions recorded from these devices were likely written "on smoked paper drums" (p. 372), which Stagner, after reading the Magoun article, recognized as the method of recording made by the kymographs used in early psychology laboratories.

Larson also sent McConnell a copy of the photograph of the instruments. McConnell accepted it as validation of the story that Coleman had shared with him and that McConnell had made public. He responded to several of his correspondents who had doubted the story with "I told you so's." Moreover, he expanded his coverage of the story in the third edition of his textbook as follows:

When this aspect of Watson's career was first reported in print in 1974, many noted psychologists refused to believe that "the great man" could have engaged in such sordid experimental studies. However, in 1978 the Museum of the Canadian Psychological Association in Montreal put on display some scientific equipment taken from Watson's laboratory at Johns Hopkins. Included in the display was "a set of small instruments for measuring the female sexual response." (McConnell, 1980, p. 327)

This paragraph was dropped from the next edition of the book, although there is nothing in McConnell's correspondence to indicate why. Thereafter, the Watson entry remained the same through all eight editions of the book, the last one published posthumously.

## The Evidence Proves Unconvincing

Whereas McConnell stuck with his tale of Watson's sexual research, other textbook authors who had reported it, one by one, discarded it in subsequent editions. We have mentioned already that Hothersall, who from the beginning was skeptical of the story's being anything more than gossip, dropped the story after having included it in one edition of his history of psychology textbook. Schultz continued the story for two editions (third and fourth) of his history text (Schultz, 1981; Schultz & Schultz, 1987), including a mention in the fourth edition of the discovery of the instruments said to have been used in the research (Schultz & Schultz, 1987, p. 7). The appearance of Buckley's biography of Watson and other comments from historian colleagues convinced him that there was little evidence to support the story, so he dropped it in later editions.

After reporting the story in the first two editions of his introductory psychology textbook (Carlson 1984, 1987), Carlson (1990) dropped the story in his third edition and all subsequent editions. Houston, Hammen, Padilla, and Bee (1989) continued the story in their third edition, the final edition of that textbook.

In all, McConnell's story was published in three history of psychology textbooks and three introductory psychology textbooks that we were able to locate. The history books first published the story in 1981, 1988, and 1995, although the latter date was Hothersall, who reported the story while indicating that he thought it false. After the Hothersall entry, the story never appeared in another history of psychology textbook of which we are aware. For the introductory psychology textbooks, the story first appeared in 1982, 1983, and 1984, and it had disappeared from those texts by 1990. Thus, the timelines for the two types of texts are comparable, spanning roughly the decade of the 1980s.

It may seem surprising that only six psychology textbooks included McConnell's story, although it should be noted that several of these textbooks were among the most popular in their fields. That is a very small portion of the market, especially in terms of the small number of introductory psychology textbooks involved. That number might be small because introductory textbook authors are reluctant to cite material from other introductory textbooks. There is pressure from the publishers and from market demands to cite mostly primary sources. Of course, after the Magoun (1981) article appeared, the textbooks could have taken the story from that source.

Perhaps some authors did not know about the story. Or maybe they avoided the story because, like Hothersall, they judged it to be too much in the realm of gossip. Or perhaps, as McConnell has suggested, they did not want to include such a lurid portrayal of Watson, one of the "great men" in psychology's history. It seems unlikely that the publication of Buckley's biography of Watson played

much of a role in removing the Watson tale from the textbooks, given its publication in 1989 when the story had already largely disappeared (Buckley, 1989). Buckley (1989) did not even recount the story in the body of his biography, but he did treat it in a lengthy endnote. He stated that the “evidence” of McConnell and Magoun was based on hearsay and a cigar box of instruments of questionable use that could not be tied directly to Watson. Buckley wrote:

The contention that Mary Ickes Watson found records of sexual experiments that she used as evidence in her divorce suit is simply not true. The complete transcripts of Watson’s divorce trial, together with copies of all evidence and testimony presented in the plaintiff’s exhibit, contain no instance in which Watson’s professional activities were called into question. Furthermore, members of Watson’s family completely dismiss the story. Watson’s daughter by his first marriage was 15 at the time of the divorce and was well aware of the particulars. . . . It is significant that a close examination of the private correspondence among the university officials and faculty involved in Watson’s dismissal does not reveal a single instance in which Watson’s professional conduct was criticized. (p. 212)

Recall that Larson (1977) had reported that the court records of the divorce were missing. However, in 1982, they were found and made publicly accessible. According to Larson (1982), the court records were “brought to light by some well placed persons with influence in the legal realm. They had been squirreled away by the authorities in 1920 to keep down the publicity for the Johns Hopkins officials who were very embarrassed” (p. 1). Of course, it is also possible that either the Ickes family or the Rayner family, both politically powerful, could have suppressed the records as well. An examination of those records confirms Buckley’s statement. There is nothing in the court records that would suggest clandestine sexual studies by Watson. But that fact did not shake McConnell’s belief in the story, and he persisted in telling it and defending it.

## Watson’s Interest in Sex

The historical record is clear that Watson was interested in sex, both personally and professionally. Photographs of Watson, including the Fabian Bachrach portrait taken when he was 65 years old, show a man of considerable good looks. In 1919, the Johns Hopkins students dedicated their yearbook to him and voted him “handsomest professor” (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 292). He has been described as a “ladies’ man” whose sexual “conquests” were often a topic of conversation. Buckley (1989) has described him as “obsessed with the pursuit of women” (p. 178). Brewer (1991) wrote that Watson “often had a coterie of young and beautiful women at his side” (p. 180). One of the people Brewer interviewed commented that “Watson was never involved in any love triangle but in a romantic polyhedron of indeterminable dimensionality” (p. 180). Historian John Burnham (1994), who interviewed Watson and many who knew him, provided these observations:

I have since interviewed many people who knew and worked with Watson, including his brother, three of his children, and his first

wife, Mary Ickes. As they talked about their memories of Watson, I learned a great deal about him as a person. He may truly have been one of the great lovers in all history: I found that people remembered his romantic adventures and the public persona he presented as a “ladies’ man,” and each time 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. In short, I learned a great deal that I did not want to know, some of it of the most intimate nature. (pp. 69–70)

Watson’s professional interest in human sexuality and his interest in physiological recordings from the genitals can be traced to an address he gave at Columbia University in April 1913, only two months after he delivered his famous behaviorist manifesto (Watson, 1913b) to an audience at that same university. In a discussion of Freudian theory and affect, Watson (1913a) noted that he was “surprised that no one has connected pleasantness with the activity of the receptors stimulated by tumescence and unpleasantness with those stimulated by shrinkage of the sex organs” (pp. 426–427). He continued, “We have taken our plethysmograms from the wrong organs. Whether there are too many technical difficulties in the way of objective registration of the many delicate changes in the sex organs (circulation, secretion, etc.) remains for the future to decide” (p. 427). One could certainly link those remarks with the alleged sexual recordings of Watson and Rayner seven years later. The remarks suggest a connection, but they are not confirming evidence.

Watson had other forays into the topic of human sexuality as well. While in the military during World War I, Watson viewed several films intended to warn soldiers about the dangers of venereal disease. After the war, he secured a grant and with the help of Karl Lashley used the films and questionnaires they developed to record attitudes about sexual behavior in general and venereal disease in particular from physicians and from the general public (Watson & Lashley, 1920).

Several of Watson’s articles written for popular magazines dealt with the subject of human sexuality, as did his book on child rearing (Watson, 1928). Chapter 6 in the seven-chapter book is titled “What Shall I Tell My Child About Sex?” Watson’s chief lament was that parents were too ignorant of the basics of sexual motivation and behavior to provide any accurate sex education for their children. Yet he promoted his call for sex education in several publications; for example, in an article in *The Nation* he wrote, “Teach [your children] (or have them taught if you are a Puritan) what to expect in the realm of sex” (Watson, 1927, p. 10).

In his 70s, Watson’s interest in human sexual behavior remained. Donald Dewsbury (1993) wrote about a series of letters between Watson and Lashley in the 1950s, noting that the most recurring theme “is the physiology of sex” (p. 265). Watson, at age 75, wrote to Lashley:

I wonder if any correlations exist between clitoris location and entrance to vagina. I should think the nearer to the entrance the better chance for the male to stimulate it during coition. Also whether a woman who experiences an orgasm regularly (if such exists) can teach another woman? I have made considerable study

of a lot of things in the field, so to speak, and I grow more modest after each research. (as cited in Dewsbury, 1993, pp. 265–266)

Dewsbury (1993) mentioned McConnell's story of the sex research and concluded that "there is no indication in this personal correspondence between close friends that such research occurred." He continued, "The passage quoted above is the only one I found that could be remotely construed in this context, and it is better read in other ways" (p. 266).

## Evaluating the Evidence

What can be made of the evidence offered to support McConnell's version of the real reason for Watson's dismissal from Johns Hopkins? To summarize the supporting evidence, first, McConnell says that he heard the story from two different sources, several years apart: initially from one of his graduate school professors and later from a man who had worked with Watson in the advertising business in New York City. Second, instruments that Watson had allegedly used in the sexual studies were found at Johns Hopkins. Third, Watson's life and career suggested a sustained interest in human sexual behavior, both personally and professionally.

How might the contrary evidence be judged? One can argue that the genesis of the story of Watson's sexual research came from McConnell's unwillingness to accept the fact that the affair with Rayner and the subsequent divorce would have been sufficient to end Watson's academic career. This is the presentist thinking mentioned earlier, an error of historical interpretation. In this case, McConnell was applying standards and mores of the 1950s–1970s to events of the 1920s (see Stocking, 1965, for a discussion of presentism). According to McConnell, he first heard the Watson story in the 1950s from Karl Dallenbach, his mentor in graduate school at the University of Texas. Psychologist and historian Rand Evans finished his doctorate at the University of Texas with Dallenbach about a decade after McConnell and probably knew Dallenbach better than any of his other students, partly because of their mutual love of history. When asked if Dallenbach had shared the sex research story with him, Evans wrote, "I don't recall his ever talking about the sexual measurements, though, and we talked about a lot of things concerning Watson's private life and that of several other famous psychologists from the time" (R. Evans, personal communication, April 25, 2006).

Again, according to McConnell, Coleman corroborated Dallenbach's story and added more detail to the account. Perhaps this corroboration provided closure to McConnell's pondering? There is no written account from Coleman, whose real name was Loyd Ring Coleman. McConnell published the story in 1974, roughly 20 years after the time he said he had heard it from Coleman. And because Coleman died in Paris in 1970, there was no way to get additional confirmation from him.

The discovery of the sex instruments attributed to Watson was supposed to provide convincing evidence for the tale. That finding was considered definitive by McCon-

nell, but it did not seem to sway many others. Bromiley wrote a few letters to Magoun in the late 1970s in which he described the circumstances under which he acquired the instruments. According to those letters, it was Roy Dorcus who first showed the instruments to Bromiley. Dorcus did not overlap with Watson on the Johns Hopkins faculty, but Dorcus was a colleague with Knight Dunlap who was on the Hopkins faculty during Watson's tenure there and knew Watson well. The 97-page oral history of Bromiley in the CPA Archives contains no mention of the Watson sex instruments (Bromiley, 1970). That history was taken in 1970. Had it been taken a decade later, after the controversy over the McConnell story, perhaps Bromiley would have addressed that topic in his history. Further, Boakes has wondered why the instruments would have been found in the Johns Hopkins psychology department. He noted that after 1918, Watson spent his research time in the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic in downtown Baltimore, several miles from the main campus (R. Boakes, personal communication, May 16, 2006).

The McConnell story stated that the research records from the sex studies figured prominently in Watson's divorce and especially his dismissal from Hopkins. The Baltimore County court records may or may not be complete, but the extant records, which rematerialized in 1982, do not indicate or even hint at the sex research story.

Although Watson burned many of his personal papers in the final years of his life, a number of his letters exist in the collections of his colleagues, such as Robert Yerkes, Karl Lashley, and Hopkins psychiatrist Adolf Meyer. The correspondence with Lashley in the 1950s—15 letters from Watson and 19 from Lashley—covers many sensitive topics, including alcohol, race, and especially sex, in a no-holds-barred, often crude manner. Given the content of a few of those letters, it seems particularly likely that Watson would have mentioned the sex research. Its absence seems telling.

The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore, Maryland, contain the papers of Adolf Meyer (1866–1950), including 24 folders of materials related to Watson, mostly personal correspondence. Watson was especially forthright in his letters to Meyer. In one five-page letter, written in the midst of his divorce proceedings, Watson described, in considerable detail, his sexual history with his wife, Mary Ickes Watson, and his justification for his affair with Rayner:

The final situation began about Xmas. Miss Rayner and I became friends and Mary became interested in another man. My wife started at Xmas to say that her interest in me was purely maternal. She told the Rayners and the man that married life with me was a bore and that she hated for the evening to come. I finally overheard her asking the man for intercourse. She told me also that our renewal of sex life six years ago was for her only a bluff. Miss Rayner went frankly to her and asked her if she minded our close friendship. Mary told her and her parents the same thing—that she did not mind and that Rosalie could have me as far as she was concerned. (Watson, 1920, pp. 2–3)

Given the frank nature of this correspondence and the fact that Watson was confessing all to Meyer in an attempt to solicit Meyer's aid in helping him retain his position at Johns Hopkins, it seems unlikely that Watson would have omitted an account of the sexual research (see Buckley, 1989, and especially Leys, 1984, for detailed descriptions of the Meyer–Watson relationship and how it influenced Watson's departure from Hopkins).

There is no mention of the story 16 years later in Watson's (1936) brief autobiography that appeared in the third volume of Murchison's series, although it would have been very unlikely for him to mention it in that publication. Further, historians Kerry Buckley and John Burnham and psychologists Cedric Larson and Charles Brewer all conducted interviews with members of Watson's family, former colleagues, and students. They have reported nothing from any of those interviews that would corroborate McConnell's story.

David Cohen (1979), a British journalist, published the first full-length biography of Watson in 1979, yet it is so filled with errors that historians have virtually disregarded it. There is a decidedly sensationalistic tone to the biography. Cohen could have learned about the sex research from McConnell's book, but apparently did not, and evidently he did not learn about it from the interviews he conducted or the records he researched. Had he known about it, he surely would have dealt with it at length.

As for Watson's interest in sex, that aspect of his life seems indisputable. He was physically attractive, personally charming, and known to have had numerous affairs. He believed that most Americans were far too puritanical about sex, and he wrote about that belief in popular articles as well as in his private correspondence. He believed that sexual behavior was a normal, healthy, and significant part of human life and that, as such, scientists, including psychologists, should be studying it. And, in print, he even suggested physiological recording studies of copulation that were similar to the sexual research in which McConnell says he engaged. But suggesting that it be done is not evidence that he did it.

Finally, in one court of public opinion, we do not know of a single textbook author who has published the story in a current edition. Those who reported it eventually dropped it, most likely because they came to believe that the story lacked credibility. For example, Schultz, referring to the McConnell story, wrote that "the work was later discredited, so I did not include it in more recent editions" (D. Schultz, personal communication, April 20, 2000).

## Conclusion

McConnell's attraction to the alleged sexual research was that it provided the "something more" that he thought had to have occurred to justify Watson's dismissal. Yet Johns Hopkins had already dealt with scandal in the person Watson replaced. Watson was hired at Johns Hopkins in 1908, and the following year he was made chair of the Philosophy and Psychology Department and editor of the journal *Psychological Review*. Both of those jobs had belonged to James Mark Baldwin (1861–1934), also a native

of South Carolina, who had eagerly sought to bring Watson from the University of Chicago to Johns Hopkins and doubled his salary to do so. But the following year Baldwin was dismissed because of a sex scandal. He had been caught in a police raid on a Baltimore house of prostitution but had managed to suppress the story. When he sought a school board position in 1909, however, the local press released the story, forcing the Johns Hopkins president and board of trustees to demand Baldwin's resignation (Buckley, 1989). Eleven years later, history was repeating itself, this time in terms of an adulterous affair with a graduate student and a later scandalous divorce. Watson's conduct had embarrassed the university, as had Baldwin's, and Johns Hopkins dealt with the two prominent professors in similar ways. In the case of Watson, the affair and the divorce were embarrassment enough. Nothing more scandalous was necessary.

Our assessment of the evidence leads us to agree with the textbook authors who appear to have decided that the story of Watson's sexual research was just that—a story, so much gossip. Given the topic of the tale—sex—and the use of the tale to claim priority for psychology in the realm of physiological studies of sexual intercourse in humans, it is surprising that the story did not become more widespread, especially after the discovery of the sexual instruments in 1978 and their proposed ties to Watson.

Although the story of Watson's alleged sexual studies appears to have been eliminated from psychology's textbooks, it has not completely disappeared. Some professors continue to tell the tale in their lectures, as we have heard from some of our correspondents, and it can be found on multiple Web sites on the Internet, including lecture notes posted for several college courses in psychology.

Perhaps the reluctance of authors to include or continue the story in their books reflects how psychologists as scientists evaluate the standards of evidence, recognizing in this instance that the evidence was not strong enough to indict Watson on the charges. Most authors seem to want to "get the story right." Lecturers should want their classes to be held to the same standard. Our hope is that this article may eliminate the story from psychology classrooms, except when it is presented as an example of the difference between gossip and history.

We have provided this detailed analysis of the Watson "sex studies" not only in an effort to bring closure to the debate over the validity of the allegations but also to remind psychologists that standards of evidence exist in historical scholarship as they do in the scholarship of behavioral science. Given the standards of evidence in history, the Watson sex research story should never have made it into print, certainly not into the journals and textbooks that define the scholarship of the field.

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