

## Rosalie Rayner, feminist?

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### Abstract

Rosalie Rayner Watson was co-author, research collaborator and second wife to the founder of behaviorism, John B. Watson. Until now, those wishing to find her own views on psychology, marriage, child rearing, and women's rights have relied on a single article she wrote in 1930 about rearing her sons. Here we reprint a second article of hers, "What future has motherhood?" published in the popular magazine *Psychology* in 1932. In it she proposes social reforms that would free married women of household responsibilities and allow them to create an identity other than wife and mother. If these were enacted, women could follow Rayner Watson's example and stop taking motherhood so seriously. To contextualize Rayner Watson's article we compare and contrast her views with those of her husband, who was known for his misogynist social commentaries. We also suggest that her proposal for reforming domestic life was consistent with some feminist plans for the post-Suffrage era.

*Keywords:* John B. Watson, Rosalie Rayner Watson, behaviorism, child rearing.

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### Resumen

Rosalie Rayner fue coautora, colaboradora de investigación y segunda esposa del fundador del conductismo, John B. Watson. Hasta ahora, quienes deseaban conocer sus ideas sobre la psicología, matrimonio, cuidado del niño y derechos de la mujer se han basado en un artículo que escribió en 1930 sobre la educación de sus hijos. En este número reimprimimos un segundo artículo suyo, "¿Qué futuro tiene la maternidad?" publicado en la revista popular *Psychology* en el año 1932. En él propone reformas sociales que liberarían a las mujeres casadas de las responsabilidades del hogar y les permitirían tener una identidad distinta de la de esposa y madre. Si dichas reformas se realizasen, las mujeres podrían seguir el ejemplo de Rosalie Rayner Watson y dejarían de tomar tan en serio la maternidad. Para contextualizar el artículo, contrastamos y comparamos sus ideas con las de su marido, conocido por sus comentarios sociales misóginos. También sugerimos que su propuesta para la reforma de la vida doméstica coincidía con algunos planes feministas para la era post-Sufragio.

*Palabras clave:* John B. Watson, Rosalie Rayner Watson, conductismo, cuidado del niño.

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In the centenary of his behaviorist manifesto, John B. Watson is a familiar figure to both historians of psychology and the literate public. Recently, Watson's public exposure has increased dramatically, thanks to revisionist accounts of his 1919 attempt to condition fear in an infant that he called "Albert B." (Watson & Rayner, 1920). In March 2013, an Israeli journalist caused a stir in that country with her endorsement of a claim that Watson was a diabolical figure who knowingly abused a "neurologically impaired child" (Tsurriel-Harari, 2013). A month later, a BBC Radio 4 documentary "Dr. Watson I Presume" repeated the claim that Watson experimented on a critically ill child and lied about it to the world (Coomes, 2013). Watson must have noticed that Albert was blind, psychologist Hall Beck exclaimed to his interviewer. It was, he said, a plot in which Watson sought out a blind child who would show no fear when first confronted by various animals – because he couldn't see them.

Missing from these sensationalistic accounts is both convincing evidence and any acknowledgement of the role played by Rosalie Rayner – Watson's student and co-experimenter – in this work and its alleged violation of research and medical ethics. This is consistent with the pronouncements by Beck and collaborators, whose exclusive focus is upon an innocent baby and a single, Mephistophelian scientist (Coomes, 2013; Fridlund, Beck, Goldie, & Irons, 2012). In the 1970s, James McConnell performed a similar demotion of Rosalie Rayner from research collaborator in his account of Watson's research on human sexual behavior. In that account Watson and Rayner had sex while she was connected to a device measuring female arousal. Although McConnell's story has been debunked (Benjamin, Whitaker, Ramsey & Zeve, 2007), its misogynistic subtext – Rosalie became a guinea pig – has escaped commentary (R. Mitchell, personal communication, April 12, 2012).

As a corrective to these views of Watson as a solitary researcher, authors have begun to explore the life and career of his collaborator Rosalie Rayner. In Spring 2012, novelist Andromeda Romano-Lax announced that her newest project was the story of Rayner, "scientific partner, lover, and later wife of famous (and infamous) psychologist John Watson" (Romano-Lax, 2012). That summer she obtained financial support for her research from the crowd sourcing web site USA Projects, and she has recently finished a first draft of her novel (A. Romano-Lax, personal communication, January 17, 2014). In 2013 the website *Psychology's Feminist Voices* added Rayner to its profiles of women in psychology who obtained their terminal degree before 1950 (Smirle, 2013). Hoping to find Rayner's own voice – apart from her co-authored articles and book with her husband – the author explained that Rayner wrote only one sole-authored article, published in 1930 (R. R. Watson, 1930). Not only is that just a single article, but it focuses narrowly on childrearing, how Rosalie was raising her sons, and her views about her husband's prohibitions on emotional contact between parent and child.

Rosalie's husband, of course, was famous for his views not just on child rearing, but on marriage, sex, religion, the family and the women's movement. His outspoken views on these subjects delighted magazine editors and provoked widespread debate (Harris, 1984). To feminists he was infamous for his antediluvian views on "the woman question," contributing to a post-suffrage backlash in the 1920s (Buckley, 1989). Rosalie Rayner was not silent on questions of gender, marriage and the family, it turns out, as the accompanying article from 1932 demonstrates. The purpose of my essay is to provide historical background for that article. My goal is to put it in the context of behaviorist theory, Rayner's life, and the feminist debates of the post-WWI era.

#### ROSALIE RAYNER WATSON'S ADVICE ON CHILDREARING, GENDER AND THE FAMILY

Before her own articles appeared, Rosalie and her family were profiled in the magazine *Psychology*, a mass circulation monthly that was as familiar to the public as it is unknown to scholars today. Originally called *Psychology: Health, Happiness and Success*, it evolved from an expression of the New Thought movement, spreading the ideas of Emile Coué, to a more eclectic magazine – a 1930s equivalent of *Psychology Today* (Harris, 2004). In "The Children of a Behaviorist," Rosalie was portrayed as the perfect behaviorist wife and mother, "one of [John B. Watson's] staunchest disciples" (Baker, 1930, p. 39). According to journalist Gladys Baker, the Watsons engineered their sons' environment from birth to make them independent and free of habits such as demanding a feeding in the middle of the night. One motive was their belief that "the mother as well as the child is entitled to a full eight hours of unbroken rest (p. 39)." At the same time, Rosalie engaged in heroic labor at home, preparing the boy's food from scratch in babyhood and keeping daily, meticulous records of their development. The result of this and the Watsonian philosophy was said to be two boys in "splendid physical condition" who are "sturdy youngsters, popular with their playmates [and] happy companions to adults" (p. 39).

Two months after this profile appeared, Rosalie's own article appeared in *The Parents' Magazine*, promoted as "the first time [Watson's] wife has ventured to tell how [his] theories work at home." In it, Mrs. Watson offered her own description of the anti-emotional child rearing advice that her husband had made so famous. Its goal was the avoidance of unhealthy attachments between parent and child, which she said she tried to break from birth onward in her two sons. Unburdened by mother and father complexes, she claimed, her sons were also freed from prejudices and fears that most parents instill in their children. For example, the young daughter of a friend thought that Rosalie seemed not a "nice woman" for wearing red nail polish, but the Watson boys liked it and other unusual colors that she brought home. To increase their chil-

dren's independence, she and her husband sent their boys off to long summer camp stays at ages 2 ½ and 4 ½ years respectively, and during the winter sent them to an outdoorsy "weekend club" that seems to have taken them away from home for one or two nights regularly.

After endorsing Watson's crypto-Freudian scheme to avoid oedipal complexes, Rosalie corrected the earlier article's portrayal of her as an entirely devout believer in her husband's extreme limits on physical and emotional contact with their sons. "In some respects I bow to the great wisdom of behaviorism, and in others I am rebellious," she said. "I am still somewhat on the side of the children." She wanted to have dinner with them more often than just on national holidays, she said. Also, she liked to play practical jokes and giggle, which she thought was childish. Childishness was something the Watsons abhorred, apparently to the detriment of their sons, both of whom attempted suicide and one of whom succeeded at it. In her article she referred to her sons as "pieces of protoplasm" to be shaped by her, and suggested that proper upbringing would produce small sized adults at an early age, instead of children who acted immaturely.

The motivation for this article and its timing are unknown. Seen from today's feminist perspective, it is tempting to think that it was Rosalie's suddenly finding her own voice after being relegated to the roles of J. B. Watson's wife and second author. While that may be true it was also an editor's clever attempt to appeal to a readership that was predominately female and interested in the woman behind the great man of science. It could also have been engineered by W. W. Norton, Watson's publisher, who had just brought out a revised edition of *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* and paid for a 2/3 page ad that followed Rayner Watson's article.

Her second article appeared in *Psychology* approximately a year later. In "What Future has Motherhood?", Rosalie was pictured as a stylish young woman who has raised two boys who look like the self-reliant, little gentlemen that her earlier article offered as ideals. Using her parental success as a badge of authority, she began by asking whether new social institutions were needed to address the restlessness of her upper middle class women friends and eliminate the stresses affecting the family, women and men.

The problem she identified was a combination of social pressure working against young mothers and their dissatisfaction with the role of stay-at-home matriarch. Because of the 1920s fetish for slim young women, Rayner Watson noted, pregnant women could no longer find the social approval of past eras and more traditional cultures. And once she gave birth and the nurses depart and leave her to child rearing, the mother of 1932 was unprepared for coping with demanding young children. Lacking the right skills, mother became a slave to her child.

In earlier times, a woman could respond by making child rearing her vocation, but social pressure turned against that in the 1920s. Now, Rosalie noted, when the

hard working businessman comes home he will accept about 30 minutes of mother and child acting out their roles in a tableau of domestic contentment. Then he wants his wife to act like he found her before marriage: flirty, paying attention to him, and ready to go out dancing and socializing. In a seemingly autobiographical note she says that the women of the 1920s have given in to their husbands' demands for an extra-maternal playmate. They have become restless and dissatisfied with traditional marriage built on women's identification with the role of mother. A related problem is that modern Americans ask everyone they meet, "what do *you do*" (as Sinclair Lewis noted in *Dodsworth*). Few can respond like Rosalie, "Nothing but entertain dull young men like you" (Watson, 1932/2014, p. 74). So women felt pressure to enter the world of business, giving them a purpose but conflicting with their maternal duties.

In her article, Rayner Watson identified an even more complicated mix of problems besetting marriage and family than I have indicated (e.g., sex), and her logic connecting cause and effect is not always clear. Sometimes this was intentional, as when she said understanding young mothers' need for freedom would require "an historian, psychiatrist and philosopher" to separate pressure from husbands and the goals of first wave feminists. Sometimes her argument just seems poorly thought out.

What are clearer are the solutions she proposed for today's restless, dissatisfied married women. Rule number one was to "not take motherhood too seriously" (Watson, 1932/2014, p. 77). Children and mothers would both do better if children were reared by a mix of nurses, governesses and other helpers, as happened in the Watson household when John and Rosalie travelled in Europe for months at a time without their sons (see illustration). And this is where the behaviorist philosophy of treating children like independent contractors – rather than serfs – would come in handy. With the responsibilities of *in loco parentis* abolished, parent and child could learn from each other whenever they manage to get together.

For the women of the future, Rayner Watson suggested that social institutions needed to be created to keep motherhood from interfering with women's careers and social lives. Russia might be a model, she suggested, with its experiments in collective child rearing and domestic work. In America, she forecast, institutes could be founded to train young women for careers in service to children in individual homes. There they would be responsible to the mother, who would be "the big executive and a member of the board of directors of her own small but important human 'concern' – the family (p. 76). The institutes could also serve as surrogate homes for children who needed temporary residential placement when parents were absent – better than a boarding school because the staff would understand psychology. The result would be what she called "a veritable retreat for the world's mishandled babes, a real power in the adjustment of midget lives" (p. 77).

As her husband did in his popular writing, Rosalie used behaviorism here to bash an existing group of professional mothers' helpers: governesses who work for one family throughout the childhood of their charges. They are usually old maids who never had children, she complained, and lacked the professional skills and emotional detachment of the young women trained in the child institutes of the future.

In concluding her article, Watson Rayner gave a breezy account of what attachment-free relations with children can be:

I scrutinize carefully and prayerfully the myriads of people I resign my children to but when I am convinced of their proficiency and kindness, I resign them cheerfully except for 'executive supervision'. Then I plunge wholeheartedly into whatever I want to do – it may be night clubs and dancing, three hours a day at the beauty parlor; tennis, writing now and then, even flirting a little and not always with my husband! Motherhood to me consequently is not a bore. It is just one of the many things that makes [sic] life amusing and joyous (pp. 77-78).

#### APPLIED BEHAVIORIST PSYCHOLOGY FOR THE MASSES

How can we contextualize this worldview and domestic advice? Its most obvious significance is as an expression of applied Watsonian behaviorism. As such, it shares important principles with the ideas and the writing of Rosalie's husband John B. Watson. However, it is more humane, less emotionally barren, and seems lacking John B's enthusiastic male chauvinism. That chauvinism was on display most blatantly in the *Nation* weekly in 1927, in the provocatively titled article "The Weakness of Women" (Watson, 1927). There, Watson responded to a series of anonymous essays in which prominent women reflected on the struggle for equality in the post-suffrage era (Showalter, 1993). Such restless, militant women are sure to be suffering from sexual "maladjustment" he explained. This diagnosis was not armchair psychoanalysis, Watson insisted, but based on "careful observations... over long periods of time" followed by scientific deduction (Watson, 1927, p. 10). Moderating his "blame the victim" message, Watson explained that women were never trained in the skills that create success in highly competitive careers.

Rosalie's answer to "what do women want?" was much less reductionist and misogynist. A woman's desire for a role other than domestic goddess might be due to husbands' demands for a playmate, she said. Or it might be left over from the struggle for equal rights – when women challenged a range of patriarchal assumptions and restrictions. Either of those explanations, I suggest, sound much more behaviorist – in the sense of environmentally caused – than most of her husband's analysis.

Also relevant to how Rosalie's writing corresponded to behaviorist dogma is John B. Watson's behaviorist utopia "Should a Child Have More than One Mother?",

published in *Liberty* in 1929. In it, John Watson blamed most social ills on modern childhood, which was too long and too dominated by mothers and the psychologically unhealthy homes they created. Showing both hostility to women and ignorance of working-class life, Watson proclaimed that wives “haven’t enough to do today. Scientific mass production has made their tasks so easy that they are overburdened with time, [which they use to destroy] the happiness of their children” (Watson, 1929, p. 31). Because parents won’t leave their children alone, parental fears and inferiorities are “stamped into [children] with sledge-hammer blows” (p. 31).

In place of this dysfunctional, traditional family, Watson imagined a utopian community of 260 couples that would swap children every four weeks, starting at birth, with parents not even knowing which of the 780 children are their biological offspring. Among the features of the utopia is a strict sex segregation of training and careers starting at age 16. Males go into business and industry as apprentices and then pick a career. Females, by contrast, are taught sexual technique, grooming, domestic science, and childrearing. They also study “the art of interesting and handling men” (p. 35). Women marry early but aren’t involved in the care of children until they are 28. That is the age at which the first wrinkle appears, putting an end to female narcissism. Although it is not spelled out, Watson seems to have had a Freudian view that young children are triangulated into an unhealthy relationship between narcissistic young mothers and their husbands or other males. His utopia seems libertarian because Watson editorialized that there was no need for involvement of the State in his future paradise.

Compared with her husband’s utopia, Rayner Watson’s plan for a more scientific motherhood seems fairly enlightened. Although child rearing is a female profession in her future society, it is a *profession* rather than one’s fate when the first wrinkle appears. And it has an institutional home that is supported by the government or the Rockefeller Foundation or its equivalent. As a result, women like Rosalie would be freed of both emotional involvement and responsibility for day to day care of their children. So, she notes, she could go to the beauty parlor or write articles for popular magazines.

While her article seems fairly tame by the standards of today and of the rebellious 1920s, the editor of *Psychology* included a disclaimer titled “What do you think?” In it he says “that while there is food for thought in this very radical article on motherhood the author carries her theories to dangerous and revolting extremes. [I do not] feel that the race is ready for such a radical departure” (Watson, 1932, February, p. 47). Although my essay does not develop this theme, the editor was touching on the eugenic concerns that underlay some reactions to the women’s movement. If the family unit was threatened by collectivist child rearing schemes, couldn’t a future government decide that white Anglo Saxon Protestants were less efficient breeders – or had less desirable traits – and discourage their mating?

## ROSALIE RAYNER WATSON'S ADVICE AS AN ECHO OF THE FEMINIST REVOLT?

A final context for Rayner Watson's challenge to traditional motherhood was the public discussion of "the woman question" – the proper role of women in society and how their current dissatisfaction could be remedied. By 1930, the most glaring legal obstacles to women's citizenship – the right to vote and own property – had been overcome. What remained, psychologist Ethel Puffer Howes explained, was the conflict between the ideal of female domesticity and women's desire for a career or life outside the home (Scarborough & Furumoto, 1987). This was a particular problem for women like Rosalie Rayner, who were well educated but had young children and a household to manage.

In the early 1920s, Howes had agreed with the wing of the feminist movement that said women must choose between motherhood and work outside the home (Howes, 1922). In 1929, however, she had come to reject "the 'intolerable choice' between married love and concrete achievement" (Howes, 1929, p. 16). Although present social arrangements didn't allow women to have a loving family life and individual development, this could change. Quoting John Dewey that progress is "inventing the social machinery" necessary for satisfying human needs, she outlined a plan to create cooperative nurseries, affordable meals to be brought home, and other reforms to domestic responsibilities (Howes, 1929, p. 19). This, she said, would free women from the stifling features of family life. "The man demands of life that he have love, home, fatherhood and the special work which his particular brain combination fits. Shall the woman demand less?" (Howes, 1929, p. 19).

Three years later, Rosalie's article appeared to join this discussion of whether women had a special biological nature and special responsibilities. Her answer was clearly 'no.' Her husband, by contrast, endorsed 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal views of women's essence while claiming to be an up-to-date, scientific man who accepted no idea on faith. Also, Rayner Watson made a qualified endorsement of Soviet attempts at collective child rearing and other domestic responsibilities (e.g., community kitchens), aligning her with some of the more radical feminists like Crystal Eastman.

On the other hand, Rosalie's message was mixed, saying that women's interest in business careers *may* be the product of social pressure – rather than an inherent drive toward greater freedom. But for a young woman who grew up in a wealthy family in Baltimore, some conflict over women's proper role is understandable. And Rosalie was wise enough to say that it would take a historian and a psychoanalyst and a philosopher to figure out the true source of women's restlessness that blossomed in the 1920s.

So, the question remains for today's readers to debate, was Rosalie Rayner Watson indeed a feminist, albeit a wealthy and somewhat spoiled one?

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Rosalie Rayner Watson circa 1925. Old drawing, courtesy of the Archives of the History of American Psychology, Center for the History of Psychology, The University of Akron – the Cedric Larson papers.