Training’s Woeful Countenance

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In this article, we explore how the folk science of physiognomy shaped the training given to salesmen in the early 20th century. In reviewing training and vocational counseling manuals from the past and using them as cultural artifacts, one can put forth the theme that the field of training and development advances only through critical reflection—specifically, questioning training’s role within a broader context including issues of social justice. Lessons learned here include the recurring idea that we, in human resource development (HRD), must be vigilant in ensuring that not only are training outcomes ethical but so too are the interventions.

Light heavyweight boxing champion Louis “Battling Siki” Fall from Senegal, Africa, was once one of the four or five most recognizable black men in the world (Benson, 2006). Therefore, it was not surprising when the Battling Siki’s likeness was used in Gordon J. A. Hargrave’s popular 1920s sales training manual, Secrets of Selling (Figure 1). However, Hargrave used Louis Fall’s picture not to lionize the boxing legend but rather to train would-be salesmen on the differences between the Emotional and the Logical Buyer. Hargrave instructed:

Your buyer's lips give you a true indication of his desires and appetites. The thick lipped, open mouthed, loose jawed buyer is very broad in his animal desires and very loose in his moral makeup. Talk emotions to the thick lipped or you will kill your sale. Do not ever waste your time trying to sell this type unless you are prepared to indulge in the coarsest, smuttiest stories and jokes . . . everything that denotes crudeness and a strong animal nature is accentuated in this type. [1927, unpaginated]
Though undoubtedly racist, it was not gratuitous racism but a racism using the folk science of the day: physiognomy.

While the tactical purpose of this paper is to raise awareness of the dubious training practice of physiognomy in the early 20th century, our strategic point is perhaps a post-modern one; that is, we hope the act of exposing this practice will then change it from an inert historical footnote to a call-to-action for practitioners to reflect—with a critical hermeneutic lens—on the hidden power imbalances within the training manuals and the training systems of today. Indeed, are we in HRD complicit in perpetuating social injustice? Would an analysis of today’s training manuals and vocational counseling conclude that HRD abets stereotyping, objectification, and patriarchy? Performing a review of such historical documents as training manuals is considered to be a reasonable framework for inquiry (Armstrong & Jones, 1987).

Background

Introduced in the modern day by the Swiss Pastor Johann Lavater in the 18th century, following his popular essays on the subject, physiognomy was the idea that a person’s outer appearance, especially the face, could provide insight into his true character or personality, and according to Lavater also could help differentiate the man of business from the rogue (Ewen & Ewen, 2006).

Clearly, the sales training manuals that relied on physiognomy for their training techniques were at best, by today’s standards, politically incorrect and, at worst, blatantly bigoted, exploiting historical stereotypes: Fat buyers were always jolly and affable; blonds were headline readers only; Japanese had a great...
ability to copy; Germans were scientific and industrious; and the Irish were given to fighting (Atkinson, 1910; Balkin, 1919; Blackford, 1916; Blackford & Newcomb, 1916; Brewster, 1917; Flint, 1923; Hargrave, 1927). Such notions also reflected the leanings in social theory of the time, including eugenics and Social Darwinism (Brown, 2005; Hofstadter, 1944). In *The Science of Judging Men* (Morrell, 1917), Morrell proffers advice to would-be salesmen regarding Jewish customers. First portraying the Jew’s nose as “acquisitive,” Morrell declares, “For the salesman to make a proper approach and influence his customer to buy his goods he must take the key which race and national types offer. . . . The Jew is always Jewish; he is a born trader and he will have to be shown bargains” (Morell, 1917, p. 56).

Performing a review of such historical documents as training manuals is considered to be a reasonable framework for inquiry (Armstrong & Jones, 1987). Training manuals in physiognomy became popular with salesmen fundamentally because it was posited that the good salesman was the one who could read faces (Friedman, 2004; Spears, 1993). F. B. Goddard’s *The Art of Selling* (Goddard, 1889) was one of the earliest examples of manuals that explicitly used physiognomy (as well as phrenology, the study of the shape of the skull) to train salesmen on the principles of selling. Specifically, the salesman needed to pay attention to the customer’s face, to the forehead, eyes, teeth, hair, and chin; for example, very large, clear blue eyes were said to denote a good and ready capacity versus small, sparkling black eyes signifying cunning. Additionally, “the pointed chin signifies acuteness or craft. The soft, fat double chin marks the epicure; the round chin with a dimple speaks to benevolence” (Goddard, 1889, p. 109).

Physiognomic sales training manuals were part of the new booming commercial climate of the early 20th century. Indeed, the number of books the Library of Congress cataloged under the subject heading “salesmanship” in 1925 listed only 10 books published before 1900, nearly 40 between 1900 and 1910, over 200 from 1910 until 1920, and 150 from 1920 to 1923 (Spears, 1993).

Physiognomy not only informed the training of the insular world of the traveling salesman (who would receive new tips and techniques monthly via correspondence courses) but also was memorialized in mainstream organizations as well. This was seen, for example, in automaker Henry Ford’s 1923 training manual, *Ford Products and Their Sale*, which contained instructions on how to vary selling techniques with prospective buyers by evaluating the customer’s forehead. As described by Friedman (2004), the manual included such instructions as selling cars to prospects according to the size and shape of the forehead: “High head leaves room for larger development at the very top. Thus we find the high-headed man comparatively idealistic and should be appealed to with that thought in mind. The low-headed prospect is to be approached with a sense of the physical, through seeing the car, and through a grosser appeal” (Friedman, 2004, p. 167).
Career Development and the Low-Hanging Septum

Physiognomy would also inform the rudimentary career development of the day. Specifically, the vocational counseling and employee selection manuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were influenced by Holmes W. Merton’s so-called Merton Method, which used a person’s face to align with a suitable job, so one could “choose the kind of life and vocation that is best suited to your natural talents and interests” (Merton, 1920, p. 3). For example, if one wanted to be an accountant, it was important to evaluate the facial region of influence for judgment and quantity as found in the side of the face at the brow and in the temple region. Indeed, “the lower line should be level with the corner of the eye-socket being about three-eighths of an inch back of the curved crest of the brow” (Merton, 1920, p. 97).

Using physiognomic principles, Merton highlighted a unique set of traits that he claimed were relevant to job performance and satisfaction. Specifically, he divided the face into four general areas—intellect, will, social affectations, and physical strength—and then each general area was subdivided into dozens of other subcategories such as reason, imagination, and integrity (Figure 2). The face of Socrates, for example, was shown to demonstrate the quality of reason, as seen in “the full upper cheek area and low-hanging septum of the nose” (Merton, 1920, p. 33).

The notion of discrete vocational aptitudes still exists within vocational counseling today (Henderson & Chan, 2005; Riemer-Reiss, 2000), up to and including the idea of how facial maturity (e.g., the baby face versus the tough-guy face) affects the perceptions of job candidates (Copley & Brownlow, 1995; Keating, 1985) as well as organizational performance metrics (Economist, 2004); still, few modern-day vocational counselors would subscribe to the detailed relationships described in the Merton Method. One modern exception was Margaret Buck’s text titled The Face, What It Means: The Merton Method of Character Analysis (Buck, 1979). Buck applied the Merton Method to celebrity faces; interestingly, Buck’s assessment included that of O. J. Simpson’s face, and in 1979 she wrote, “the brow indicates keen visual perception; the broad chin denotes muscular flexibility and strength; the full mouth is the sign of the social affections and emotions” (Buck, 1979, p. 105). The present day reader is left to contemplate the accuracy of Buck’s Simpson analysis.

Physiognomy and the Critical Hermeneutics of HRD

To be sure, the training and vocational counseling manuals can be interpreted only by situating them in the totality of their historical and cultural contexts; that is, “the meaning of a text always goes beyond its author” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 264). In reviewing training and vocational counseling manuals from the past and using them as cultural artifacts, it is essential to reflect on the relationship between text and context (Gadamer, 1975; Lee & Poyntton,
With the lens of critical hermeneutics, we are able to contemplate the (not always) hidden power imbalances within the training manuals and question the status quo of the day (as in “the Broad-Nosed buyer is uncouth” or “the Receding Forehead has a more practical intellect”), especially as it relates to propagating racism and anti-Semitism within training schemes.

It is also important to reflect on the difference between what we term passive and active physiognomy; that is, using physiognomy to “make the sale” as opposed to using physiognomy to perpetuate oppression. For example, in the United States physiognomy was used and propagated almost exclusively as a performance driver; capitalist authors wrote on physiognomy in the context of how it could enrich one’s bottom line, whether as a salesman or advertising as a vocational counselor. This differed from European physiognomy, which embedded itself into the culture at a much deeper level. According to Brown (2005), European physiognomy was a response to the displacements that accompanied the transition to modernity; it offered a “scientific” methodology to distinguish the “sincere for the
sycophantic, the authentic from the arriviste” (p. 34). At its most perverse, Nazi Germany used physiognomy as part of its eugenics racial purity agenda set out by fascist intellectuals. Here physiognomy gave meaning to the Nazi’s central theme of the Jew as a wandering cultural parasite via immutable racial personality traits (Browning, 2000; Goldhagen, 1997; Gray, 2004). This was operationalized in the Nazi’s forced Jewish labor and vocational training policies (Nabb & Armstrong, 2005). Many Germans felt that the Jew needed to be taught a lesson because it was thought that historically the Jew shirked physical work; Jews were vilified as “middlemen” who lived off the physical labor of the German working class (Goldhagen, 1997; Klemperer, 2001). Physiognomic principles gave meaning to this assertion; it was said that “the Jewish nose with its nostrility along with the cold calculation of [Jewish] eyes rendered the Jew more a dreamer . . . than a [hard-working] merchant” (Ewen & Ewen, 2006, p. 219).

Implications for Practice

The onset of the Great Depression hastened abandonment of the “science” of physiognomy as an accepted practice in American salesmanship—in no small part because its principles also collapsed under empirical scientific scrutiny. Legitimately applied psychological methods that could affect job performance soon filled the void in training design (Friedman, 2004; Spears, 1993).

One commonly held theme is that the field of training and development advances only through critical reflection (Elliott & Turnbull, 2006; van Woerkom, 2004), which includes questioning training’s role within a broader context of issues of social justice (Gilley, Callahan, et al., 2002). Consider, this is a particularly timely reflection given the growing use of biometrics in the workplace (Biometric, 2004; Clarke, 2006). In fact, according to Nabb and Armstrong (2005), responsible critical reflection may be the only way we have of policing ourselves.

In sum, the recurring idea here is that we, in HRD, must be vigilant in ensuring that not only training outcomes are ethical but so too the interventions (Kopp, 2007). A larger point for both scholar and practitioner is to be reminded that although our raison d’être in the training and development field is improving workplace performance, specifically as a function of the employee’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs), motivation, and within his or her environment, we must not only consider how training is shaped by this environment but also evaluate the status of social justice from which it operates, including political, cultural, and economic aspects.

Indeed, we need to reflect in the present day how future scholars and practitioners will evaluate our current training techniques 80 years from now.
References


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