

# Biography of June Etta Downey

June Etta Downey was one of the original psychologists to study personality scientifically. Her research on handwriting and other motor functions led to the development of the Downey Individual Will-Temperament Test, an early personality inventory. She headed the combined Department of Psychology and Philosophy at the University of Wyoming, the first woman to hold such a position at a state university. From 1923 to 1925 she served on the Council of the American Psychological Association, a rare appointment for a woman at that time. Although her contributions have become obscure, her work was influential in creating a basis for the study of personality and personality testing.

June Etta Downey was born on July 13, 1875 in Laramie, Wyoming. She received her preparatory education in Laramie and remained there to attend the University of Wyoming. She graduated in 1895 with the degree in Greek and Latin. Her interest in aesthetics led her to the University of Chicago, where she received an A.M. degree in 1898. While in Chicago, Downey published her first article, *A Musical Experiment*, in the *American Journal of Psychology* (1897). The link between psychology and the arts was one of her lifelong interests.

Upon graduation, Downey returned to the University of Wyoming as an instructor of English and Philosophy. In 1901, she attended a summer session at Cornell University where she studied under Edward B. Titchener, a student of Wundt, and an important leader in early experimental psychology in America. Her strong interest in experimental psychology was evident from that point onward.

In 1905, Downey was made a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wyoming, but the following year she returned to the University of Chicago to work towards a doctoral degree. James Rowland Angell was her advisor, and both Angell and John B.

Watson, were among the subjects for her dissertation. In her doctoral research, titled *Control Processes in Modified Handwriting: An Experimental Study*, she maintained that handwriting gave clues to an individual's temperament and personality. Downey received her Ph.D. in psychology in 1907.

She returned to Wyoming where she became chair of the Department of Philosophy. In 1915, she was made head of a newly combined Department of Psychology and Philosophy, a position she held until her death. Despite limited resources, Downey made important contributions to the experimental study of personality. She believed strongly in the mind–body connection and identified motor processes as a way to express character traits. She became an expert in “muscle-reading,” the examination of involuntary movements as a way to understand personality. Downey was greatly interested in the creative arts. She wrote poems, plays, and stories throughout her life. She even wrote the school song Alma Mater for the University of Wyoming. In 1911, she published *The Imaginal Reaction to Poetry*, one of her most important experiments involving the arts. This study examined the images people had in response to reading poetry. Downey believed that variation in such images revealed differences in character.

Downey's preliminary work on personality led her to the creation of the Downey Individual Will-Temperament Test in 1919. This test assessed personality primarily through the use of handwriting analysis and simplified “muscle reading” of involuntary motor actions. It contained 10 subtests and the scores could be added to obtain a total score representing the general level of “will-capacity.” Downey believed that the overall profile was the most important. She particularly encouraged examiners to look at the intra-individual relationship of the subtest scores in order to obtain a complete picture of the individual's personality.

Downey hypothesized that the subtests reflected three underlying personality types: (1) the quick, by the seat of the pants, *hairtrigger* type; (2) the forceful, decisive, *willful* type; and (3) the slow, careful, *accurate* type. While she believed that the profile would identify subjects as belonging to one of the three personality types, she was open to the possibility that some individuals would exhibit mixed traits.

The importance of the Downey Individual Will-Temperament Test cannot be underestimated. It was one of the first tests to evaluate character traits separately from intellectual capacity. It was also one of the first to use psychographic methods in its interpretation. Instead of simply using a score, Downey asked examiners to use a graph of the interrelated subtests to form a more complete impression of the individual. Some psychologists believed that the tests would be particularly useful with people of different races and ethnicity. Because of its emphasis on motor actions, it did not appear to favor any particular group. In 1922, Downey adapted the test to administer to groups, creating the Downey Group Will-Temperament Test.

Although highly valuable in intent and originality, the Downey tests also possessed great weaknesses. Downey continually pointed to the importance of the intra-individual relationship of the subtests, but did not provide any norms for comparisons. The tests had poor reliability, the subtests were very short and those subtests that supposedly measured similar traits did not correlate highly with each other. The tests also possessed poor validity, at least when the results were compared to personality ratings. In addition, there were complaints that the administration was complicated and the scoring was too subjective. All of these weaknesses prevented the tests from being more widely accepted, and Downey was planning to revise the tests at the time of her death.

Despite her visibility, Downey never craved the spotlight. As she grew older, she concentrated on her teaching and left Laramie less often. In the last decade of her life she received many forms of recognition, including appointment to APA Council, membership in the Society of Experimentalists, and election as a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In these later years, her research focused on imagery and handedness. In all, she wrote seven books and more than 70 articles.

Downey became ill while attending the Third International Congress on Eugenics in New York City. She died two months later of cancer at the home of her sister in Trenton, NJ. She was 57 years old. The University held a memorial service for her and a bronze plaque was unveiled in her honor.

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